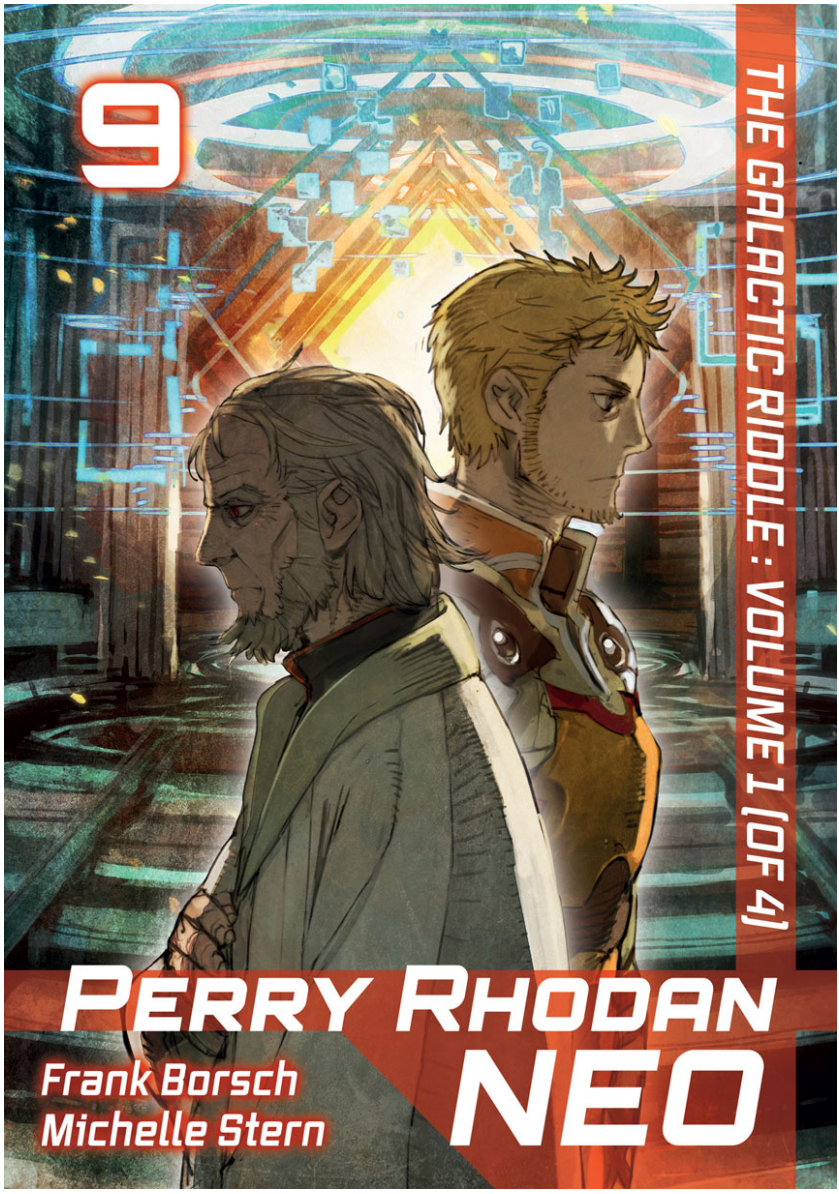
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THE GALACTIC RIDDLE: VOLUME 1 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Frank Borsch
Michelle Stern

Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 9 [Complete]

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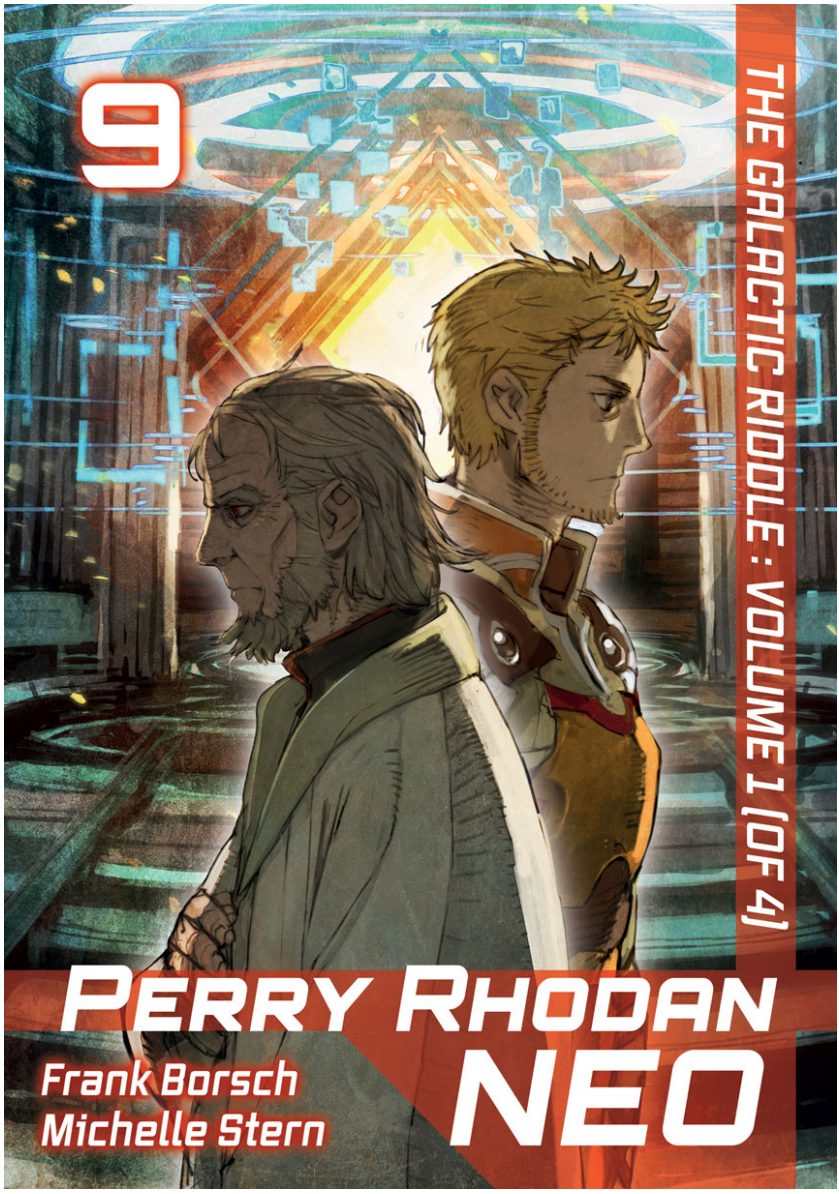
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Episode 17: The Administrator

By Frank Borsch

1.

Perry Rhodan

The Vega System

September 13, 2036

The *Tosoma* remained behind the two humans and the Ferron man.

The ship was a gigantic steel sphere with a diameter of around eight hundred meters. A technological marvel that, until only a few weeks ago, had been beyond anyone's wildest dreams. And now the *Tosoma* was the flagship of humanity, and—at least for the moment—the only ship on Earth that was capable of traveling the inconceivable distances between the stars.

The *Tosoma*, illuminated by a number of position lights, grew rapidly smaller until it was just one twinkling star among many. And with the *Tosoma*, their home planet was left behind, as was Lesly K. Pounder, who, as Director of NASA, had sent Perry Rhodan and three comrades on a crazy mission to the Moon. The same Lesly K. Pounder who was now commandeering the miraculous Arkonide ship while commenting on Rhodan's plan in his usual direct manner.

"Stop mucking around, Rhodan! The people on Earth are waiting for you!"

Rhodan had not listened to his mentor. He did not think much of telling others to do something he wasn't prepared to dare himself. He stretched his arms out, touched the screen that was assigned to his place, and deleted the image of the giant spacesphere from it.

Perry Rhodan concentrated fully on the here and now. The air in the narrow cabin of the Ferron ship was stuffy, underlaid with a whiff of cool metal and a dry note that the astronauts of Vega had left behind. It reminded him of the confinement in the cabin of the

Stardust, which had taken him and his companions to the Moon. The only difference was that a sharp smell of sweat had hung in the air then. That was missing on board the *Panerc*. Ferrons did not sweat.

To his left was Reginald Bull, Rhodan's best friend, belted into the elaborately upholstered seat, checking out the "ferry's" systems. They had appointed him flight board engineer. Bull was wearing an Arkonide battledress with the helmet folded away. The red-stubbled man noticed Rhodan's inquisitive look. He had narrowed his eyes and was trying to decipher the rows of Ferron letters whizzing past on the screens of the diagnostic displays.

Chaktor, an astronaut from the Vega system, was on his right-hand side. Like most Ferrons, he was smaller and more compact than a human, his body being adapted to the considerably higher gravity on his home planet. His skin was blue, his hair the color of copper. His eyes were set in deep sockets and protected by a protruding brow that made them difficult to discern.

Chaktor was also wearing an Arkonide battledress. The material had turned out to be flexible enough to adapt itself to the body of a humanoid who was only one-meter-sixty tall, and much wider than you would have expected for a man of his size. Two heavy ray guns were tucked into his belt. They were the biggest weapons found in the arsenal of the *Tosoma* that the Ferron man was capable of carrying. Chaktor had insisted on the weapons if he was going to accompany the two humans on their crazy mission.

Rhodan looked at his own face for a second in the reflection of one of the displays. Alert greenish blue eyes looked back at him. Rhodan had short blonde hair and a face that was sometimes slim, at other times haggard, and at other times spirited. If you looked at him closely, you could see a small scar on his right nostril.

It was the face of a human.

Chaktor believed it to be the face of the Bringer of Light who had rescued his people. And it was only to protect the Bringer of the Light that the Ferron man had been prepared to come along on this flight. It was only thanks to the Bringer of the Light, Chaktor

believed, that they had the slightest chance whatsoever of surviving what lay ahead of them.

Rhodan brought what it was that lay ahead onto the large frontal display. A washed-out disc was hanging in the blackness of space. It reminded the experienced astronaut of the planet Jupiter from his own solar system, a so-called gas giant.

But the world they were approaching with increasing acceleration was Gol. It was the fourteenth of forty-two planets in the Vega system and—compared to Gol—Jupiter seemed like a snug and cozy place to be. Gol measured almost 200,000 kilometers in diameter. The main part of its atmosphere was made of hydrogen, followed by helium, methane, and ammonia. Its gravity was almost twenty times that of Earth's, and instead of one large red spot like Jupiter, it had hundreds of dots all over its atmosphere that were reminiscent of Rorschach blotches. The storms that were raging on Gol kept the dots in motion, scattering them, creating new formations all the time.Over the course of the millennia, the Ferrons had realized that certain patterns always repeated themselves.

Chaktor, the experienced and steadfast astronaut, gasped at the sight of the planet. He reached towards the metal egg that he had attached to his personal display and pressed it against his body. When the Farron man rubbed it, a three-dimensional picture emerged. It showed his family—three wives and two dozen children. For several weeks now, Chaktor had only brought out the picture on rare occasions. It caused him too much pain. After the Topsidans had withdrawn from the Vega system, he had learned that only two of his wives and seventeen of his children had survived the lizard people's invasion.

"Are we on the right course?" Rhodan asked Chaktor as a diversion.

Chaktor straightened again, retrieved a few data sets, and enlarged sections of the image on his display. He was the team's navigator.

Shortly after that, lines appeared on the front display, joining up the red dots on Gol's surface. To Rhodan they looked like the stellar

constellations you could see from Earth. And there was a reason for that, as it soon became apparent.

"Yes," the Ferron astronaut answered. "Look here. One of the 'constellations' is lit up. "We're above the 'Custodian of Hell.' If we keep to the same vector, we will enter the atmosphere above the 'Nest of the Scavenging Serpents.'"

"That's something pleasant to look forward to!" Bull roared. "Hopefully we won't be attacked by one."

"All systems ready to go?" Rhodan asked, ignoring his friend's comment.

Bull didn't lift a finger to operate the touchscreens in front of him. "As ready as we'll ever be." His tone sounded almost insulted. Since encountering the Arkonides on Earth's Moon, Bull had spent every minute playing around with extraterrestrial technology. Whether from the Arkonides, the Fantan, the Topsidans, or the Ferrons—if there was such a thing as an expert in extraterrestrial technology, it was Reginald Bull.

"Good," Rhodan answered. "I'll start the reactor."

The upholstered seat on which Rhodan was sitting began to vibrate. The cabin was filled by a high squeaking sound, which dropped gradually to become a deep, penetrating humming noise. Rhodan was pulled downward as the antigrav neutralisers started doing their job, canceling out the weightlessness of space.

Before the Topsidan invasion, the *Panerc* had operated as a ferry on one of the moons of the outer planets. It had carried workers and supplies out of orbit to the surface and then taken workers and minerals back into orbit. The *Panerc* was an ugly vessel, a compact cylinder with a handful of landing supports attached to its rear. A vehicle that fulfilled a purpose, whose designers had had the luxury of not having to pay attention to aerodynamics, knowing it would be deployed on the moons that had no atmosphere. It was a workhorse created to take some pretty hard knocks without grumbling. A vessel that the humans would not cry over if they lost it, unlike the *Tosoma*.

In other words, it was precisely the type of vessel they needed for this venture.

And they had even primped it up a little. The Topsidans had left behind considerable quantities of war debris when they had withdrawn from the Vega system. Burned out, charcoaled wrecks, not even of interest to the insatiable Fantan. And yet, from time to time, appearances were deceptive, and humans found components among the ruins that miraculously still worked.

The *Panerc* had been given a Topsidian fusion reactor along with thrust neutralisers, high-thrust sub-lightspeed drives, and a protective shield generator. Every single component was hopelessly oversized, and they hoped this made them sufficient for their descent into the Ferrons' hell.

"Helmets closed!" Rhodan ordered. "We're about to descend to the surface."

The battledress helmets closed with a light hissing sound, shutting the two humans and the Ferrron into their perfect, self-sufficient environments. Rhodan ramped up the thrust power for several seconds. The Topsidian drives reacted immediately and with precision.

"I'm activating the shield!"

The humming of the reactor became louder as the five-dimensional shield emerged. A semi-transparent, illuminated dome closed over the *Panerc*. The light came from the gasses dissipating from the shield. Rhodan checked the shield capacity out of the corner of his eye—between nine and eleven percent. That still gave them plenty of room for maneuvering.

Chaktor began mumbling something. The translator in Rhodan's suit did not interpret the words, but it sounded like a prayer of some sort, an incantation. The Ferron man squeezed the metal egg tightly against his belly in the same way a human would have pressed it against their chest.

Bull said out loud, "Are you seeing your first ghosts, Chaktor?"

It was an inexcusably irreverent remark. The kind of comment that only Reg would make—and one that only a friend could get away with.

“None that looks anywhere near as terrible as you do, red-haired human!" Chaktor responded in the same sardonic tone.

Bull laughed out loud. “Well, then! Everything’s fine and dandy?”

“You said it!” Chaktor agreed.

Rhodan listened to them, astonished. A gruff camaraderie had quickly developed between Bull and Chaktor. The human and Ferron seemed to see each other as equals while Chaktor still treated Rhodan with a kind of awe. Rhodan had brought the Light back to the Ferrons. This had earned him unconditional respect, but the downside was a certain unbreachable distance.

“If you ask me,” Bull said. “I can’t see any ghosts here. Only poisonous gas and storms of the nastiest sort.”

“If you could easily see them, then they wouldn’t be ghosts,” Chaktor interjected.

Bull was silent for a moment, then he shook his head slowly. “Chaktor, you’re an astronaut. I still can’t get my head around the fact that you believe in those far-fetched legends about Gol. “

“They’re no less far-fetched than the legends about the Bringers of the Light. And yet you came!”

“Sure. And now look at what superior beings you’re hanging around with! The lousiest baseball player Columbus High ever saw. Just ask my old sports teacher!”

“Well, you rescued us Ferrons, and that’s true enough.” Chaktor obviously didn’t know what ‘baseball player’ or ‘Columbus High’ meant. “I’ll just overlook all the rest.”

“Very honorable of you. You…what the—” Bull’s was cut off mid-sentence by a sudden jerk.

“Nothing to worry about,” Rhodan assured them. “The pressure absorbers are not working in full synchronicity. A jet stream in the upper atmosphere hit us. I think it was going at about five hundred kilometers an hour relative to the surface.”

“You ‘think’?” Bull said sarcastically. “You’re a trained astronaut; don’t you have the exact figure?”

“Unfortunately not.” Rhodan turned to the right. “Chaktor?

The fingers of the Ferron man were dashing across the touchscreen, and then he finally leaned back. “Nothing on either infrared or radar, and nothing on the microwave rangefinder. I told you.”

Before setting off on this mission, Chaktor had voiced a number of warnings. Gol was a mystery. The Ferrons had been able to travel through space in their system for millennia. But no vehicle—either manned or unmanned—had never managed to descend into the lower layers of Gol’s atmosphere and come back again. According to the physical data, there was no lack of scientific explanations for this failure. However, Chaktor, who was otherwise a very rational astronaut, didn’t hold with rational explanations in this case. There was only one explanation to his mind: the ghosts of Gol.

Bad humans went to hell after death or some equivalent that their respective religion dictated. The souls of bad Ferrons were locked up on Gol. Chaktor believed this without the slightest doubt. Like all Ferrons. That was remarkable to Rhodan, considering how culturally splintered the inhabitants of Vega were in his experience. There were obviously only three things that all Ferrons shared: their unconditional respect for the Thort, their language, and their belief in the ghosts of Gol.

It was a superstition. Anachronistic, but explainable. Rhodan believed it to be the product of the long wars the Ferrons had fought against one another in what they called their Dark Age. Numerous crimes were committed back then. Crimes of which only a fraction had been atoned for. The legends about the souls of the evil ones who were locked up on Gol at least created the appearance of some kind of higher justice.

Bull suddenly sat up straight, but his seatbelt held him back. He looked at the display in front of him in disbelief. “What the hell’s going on?” he asked, slapping the display with the palm of his hand as if the device had gone crazy and he could somehow bring it back to normal by hitting it. When this didn’t work, he came to his senses and called up the diagnostic functions.

After a few seconds, he sank back into the seat, his eyes wide open. “We’ve lost our connection to the *Tosoma*. How could that happen? Pounder was right behind us above the atmosphere. We aren’t even ten thousand kilometers apart.”

“The ghosts,” Chaktor whispered quietly. “They don’t like intruders.”

“I don’t think it means anything,” Rhodan commented. “The physical conditions on Gol are extreme. That’s a well-known fact. Otherwise, the Ferrons would have managed to find out more about the planet over the last millennia.” He turned to Bull. “Reg, are all systems functioning perfectly?”

“Yes. I think so.” His friend wasn’t looking at him. He was working his way through the depths of the Ferron onboard software.

Rhodan nodded. “I didn’t expect anything else. We will continue our flight.” He pushed the joystick away from him, and the *Panerc* started descending. The atmosphere became even thicker. The ferry’s instruments were working very hard, but they still couldn’t penetrate the fog. The surface of Gol remained hidden.

The two humans and Chaktor were silent. The humming of the fusion reactor increased as the shields required an increasing amount of power, with the figures showing them at almost twenty-five percent capacity.

“We’re going to have to change course,” Chaktor said, breaking the silence.

“Why?”

“There’s a whirlwind zone between us and our destination. Two storm fronts clashing with one another.”

“We have a protective shield,” Bull argued.

“The speed of the two weather fronts is around eight hundred kilometers per hour.” Chaktor explained. “We don’t want to take any unnecessary risks.”

“Chaktor’s right,” Rhodan said. “Should we take an alternative course?”

Chaktor sent a suggestion for this over to the human astronaut’s personal display. Rhodan went for it, steering the *Panerc* in a broad arc around the edges of the whirlwind zone. However, the ferry was still hit by gusts at irregular intervals. The experienced former test pilot managed to compensate for that with the support of the onboard computer, bringing the *Panerc* back on to its planned course.

“Perry?” Bull whispered.

“Yes?”

“You know that I’m a polite and considerate person, and it’s not really my way to interrupt the work of others, but...”

“But what?”

“I would urgently recommend that you take your eyes off the instrument panel for a second and look portside. You won’t regret it, I promise you.”

Rhodan checked the status figures, confirmed for himself that the *Panerc* was in a stable descent, and then did what his friend had asked him to. He looked into the whirlwind zone.

It was illuminated from within, as if a fire was burning inside it. An angry, multicolored fire that occasionally puffed up and then shrank back again, in the process making shapes that looked like figures to the mind.

To humans they looked like figures dancing, a wild choreography. To Ferrons they were tortured souls.

"The ghosts of Gol!" Chaktor exclaimed. "We have to..."

The Ferron man was unable to continue. All of a sudden, the gravity in the ferry increased dramatically. Rhodan felt himself being pressed down into his seat by an invisible hand. It pressed against his chest so hard, it was impossible for him to breathe. His eyes veiled over. Rhodan squeezed them together, read the numbers on the instrument panel, and realized that they didn't make any sense.

The *Panerc's* descent turned into a tumbling, uncontrolled fall. The drives roared loudly as the onboard computer reacted. The tumbling quickly became an increasingly fast rotation as the *Panerc* hurtled downward. Something grinded as stressed steel tore noisily apart.

"The numbers!" Bull screamed, gasping. "They're wrong! The computer—" The drives went off for a second and then on again in another vector. The thrust took his breath away.

The computer! Rhodan bent his arm trying to reach the emergency shutdown. He couldn't get to it, although it was only an arm's length away from him. A human was not strong enough to… Something suddenly occurred to Rhodan.

"Chaktor!" he screamed. "The onboard computer. Switch it—"

Chaktor understood. Centimeter by centimeter his hand crept towards the emergency shutdown switch. Rhodan saw his arm muscles bulge. The gravity on Chaktor's home planet was almost one-and-a-half times more than on Earth. Ferrons were stronger than humans, and Chaktor was able to manage what would have been impossible for a human.

The Ferron exerted his muscles, gasped, and his hand overcame the last few centimeters between him and the emergency switch. The drives stopped abruptly.

Rhodan held on tightly to the joystick. He closed his eyes, ignoring the absurd readings on the instrument panel. Using his left hand, he switched off the *Panerc's* auxiliary systems, paying no attention to the protests of Bull, who shouted, "Have you gone completely mad, Perry?"

Perry Rhodan thought back to March 14, 2032. The day he should have died. Not far from the runway at Nevada Fields, when the prototype of the interplanetary shuttle had gone into a tailspin. Rhodan had ignored the instruments, the well-intended instructions of the control center, and Pounder's orders. Instead, he had looked inward and had sensed what needed to be done. With his eyes closed, he had regained control of the shuttle and forced it onto the runway. A crash landing, nothing more. But it was a sensational event that had turned Pounder into his mentor and ultimately sent him to the Moon on the *Stardust*, where he had met the Arkonides...just to die here?

No.

Rhodan gave more thrust to the steering jets running around the fuselage of the *Panerc*. The ferry reacted immediately, as if it had just been waiting to get the right instructions. Further bursts of thrust stopped it from tumbling, and the *Panerc* leveled out.

Rhodan opened his eyes. The gassy haze of Gol undulated before the cockpit windows. It was lit up from within. Then, all of a sudden, the haze thinned and a hilly landscape became visible.

"The surface!" Bull cried out.

Rhodan had already reacted. He set the Topsidian drives on to full thrust. The *Panerc* shuddered and groaned, but it remained stable, although the deceleration values went far beyond the capacity designed by its builders.

Two hundred meters above the surface, the flight of the *Panerc* ended. Rhodan reduced the drive power and allowed the ferry to hover.

Bull burst out, "That was close! Damn close!" As he said it, he

looked over the numbers on his display and froze. Then he cursed. “Damn! We have to get out of here, Perry! Fast!”

“Why? The fuselage held.”

“Yes. But not the reactor. It’s losing power. Let’s get out of here while we still can!”

“No!” Chaktor said in a voice that was loud and determined.

“What?” Bull looked at his Ferron companion, surprised. “A few minutes ago you couldn’t get off your ghostly planet fast enough. And now—”

“I can see clearly now,” Chaktor said as he pointed out the reinforced window of the cockpit, starboard.

Rhodan and Bull looked in the direction he was pointing. They saw an elongated valley. In its middle was a winding, dried-out riverbed that must have been created by liquids other than water. There were rocks and rubble, and a longer, smoother cylinder that became broader in the middle to form a sphere.

A Topsidian spaceship. The bait that had lured them into the Ferrons’ hell.

Without hesitation, Rhodan proceeded to land.

2.

Crest da Zoltral

Before the Azores

September 13, 2036

It was night in the steel dome at the bottom of the Atlantic. Or at least it was what most people meant when they used that term.

Several hundred people now considered the dome, which had been erected by Arkonides, to be their home. They were scientists from all areas of research, and they were doing everything they could to find out its secrets.

Extremely eager in their endeavors, they worked sixteen, even eighteen hours in a row without a break, afterwards sinking exhausted into their beds. The humans had hoped that they would be able to reduce their need for sleep using medication. But it didn't work. As soon as they slept for less than six hours, their ability to perform sank enormously. The humans needed their sleep. Undisturbed, deep sleep.

Undisturbed, deep sleep was a luxury that was seldom granted to an old Arkonide man. It was also a luxury that Crest da Zoltral could do without. Three or four hours were enough for him. That gave him two hours during which he was undisturbed by the humans.

Crest remained standing in front of the heavy hatch. It slid silently to one side, allowing the Arkonide man to enter the room. Light flared up, revealing that the dome's control center was deserted. He walked into the circular room, ordering the dome's positronic to put out the light with a hand gesture.

The computer obeyed. Darkness settled over the room, interrupted only by the soft glow of the displays on standby. The light was sufficient to allow Crest to make his way to the middle of

the control center. He sat down in the Commander's contoured chair. The material was soft and warm, and it reminded him of the skin of an animal as it adapted automatically to his body.

Virtual control panels lit up, offering Crest their services. He made a gesture to show that he did not require them. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and listened. Deep, various humming sounds filled the dome, revealing the number of aggregates just waiting for instructions from the Arkonide. They reminded him of the *Aetron*, the ship in which he had traveled to the humans' system. He had often lain in the bed in his cabin, listening to the noises the ship made and asking himself what might lie ahead. His imagination had spat out all sorts of wild and monstrous scenarios, and yet not one of them had remotely resembled what had actually come to pass.

Crest da Zoltral had been reluctant to leave Arkon. He was highly respected there. Some people looked up to him as a scholar who was unparalleled in their long history. Others had ridiculed and scorned him. The Regent, on the other hand, had observed the elderly man with a sharp mind suspiciously. He quite rightly feared that Crest might prove dangerous to his rule, worried that the scholar could destroy the fragile ideological foundations on which the Regent's power was built.

In the beginning, the Regent was against his expedition on the *Aetron*. On principle, Crest afterwards believed, because he regarded everything that the scholar undertook with suspicion. He had ultimately allowed Crest and Thora to leave in the belief that he had finally gotten rid of the intellectual pest once and for all.

A well-founded forecast. Exactly what one would expect of the Regent. Crest did not like either the means used by the ruler nor his goals, and he certainly did not like his view of the world, which was plagued by paranoia. But the elderly Arkonide was too clever to dismiss his opponent. The Regent was unusually intelligent, extraordinarily capable, and that was precisely why he was bad for Arkon.

Crest opened his eyes and imagined for a moment that he was floating all alone in space, and that the standby lights were stars. Arkon and his battle against the Regent had meant everything to

him—and now his home planet seemed endlessly far away. It even seemed unimportant.

He, the great scholar of the Great Imperium, was stranded among barbarians. At the periphery of the universe that, for a very long time, had been ruled by Arkon in name only. The barbarians had mistreated him, placed him before their courts, and threatened to kill him. Yet other barbarians had saved his life. They had healed his immunodeficiency, which had been making him weaker with every passing day and which would have killed him within a very short time. The illness that the Arkonide doctors had not been able to cure. Or had they simply not dared to due to their fear of the Regent's anger?

Crest had come to appreciate these barbarians, the humans. Indeed, he had even come to love them. They touched something in him that he did not know had been there. Was it their constant zest for action? Their enthusiasm? Their optimism? In a word, their youth?

Could a type of intelligence even be described as young or old? Was this manner of categorizing things not mere foolishness? A grossly negligent generalization that revealed more about his own longing than it did about these humans? Crest pondered these questions. In earlier times, he would not have had to think these things through on his own. The invisible friend in his head would have been at his side and would have prevented him through its mercilessly honest observations from coming to any false conclusions.

But this extra sense, a sign of his privileged position, had fallen silent. Had the turn Crest's life had taken robbed him of this inner voice? Or had the treatments carried out by the humans to save his life somehow killed it? Perhaps his extra sense had simply given up trying to convince the old fool with which it was inextricably involved. It had argued vehemently against the expedition on the *Aetron*. The voice had derided Crest, describing the flight as an intellectual mistake on the part of the elderly Arkonide, his motivation being his inability to cope with his fear of dying. It was an escape from responsibility, the voice had said. And then it prophesied Crest's unavoidable and terrible death.

Has it been right? Crest was alive. And he had come across things in this remote human system that he would not have considered possible. Like this steel dome three thousand meters below sea level, built by his own people about ten thousand Earth years ago. Or the refuge on Venus. Or the *Tosoma*, the battleship they had found only a few meters from the dome, sunk halfway into the ocean floor. Who might have occupied this commander's seat before him? What might have gone through his or her mind?

Ten thousand years ago the Great Imperium had fought a murderous war against the Methanes, almost bringing about the downfall of the Arkonides. Countless stories passed down tales of heroic acts by the Arkonides of the time. They seemed to be larger than life, made of very different material than the current generations. Crest and his contemporaries seemed like nothing more than a poor imitation.

Was that true? A thought came to his mind. The humans also passed down similar stories. Crest spent several hours every day reading the literature and myths of the humans. A few days ago he had discovered Hesiod, a Greek man who had lived more than two and a half thousand years ago. A farmer who was at the same time a poet. Hesiod had believed in the succession of different eras in the world's history. At the beginning, there had been the Golden Age, the ideal state for humanity. That was followed by the Silver Age, the era of the heroes. Then came the Iron Age, a vale of tears full of human suffering in which Hesiod saw himself.

Could eras like the ones Hesiod believed in be transferred to the history of his own people? Had the Iron Age of the Arkonides begun? And if that was the case, what would come next? Their downfall?

Crest stretched, trying to shake off these dark thoughts. How could he ever take the legends of a primitive farmer who had lived millennia ago seriously? It was absurd, and yet he had to admit that was precisely what had brought him to Earth—a legend.

A legend that he wanted to get to the bottom of.

"Positronic?"

“At your service.”

He could not locate the voice—it was just there. “Do you accept that I have the right to issue you commands?” Crest asked.

“Yes.”

“Unrestrictedly?”

“I will serve you to the best of my abilities.”

Was that just an empty phrase or a hint that his power was limited? “Who built you, Positronic?”

“Arkonides.”

A correct answer to a question that had long since been answered. “Who ordered it to be built?” he asked more precisely.

“The Commander.”

“Who was the Commander?”

The computer answered without a second’s hesitation. “The Superior Commander of the Protective Fleet of the Arkonide Colony on Larsaf III.”

Larsaf III was the Arkonide term for Earth. The planet was not considered important enough to have its own name.

“What was the Commander’s name?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Was your memory deleted?”

“That is possible. I can’t remember.”

The statement was logical. Assuming the commander had wanted to get rid of any traces of what had gone on there, it made sense that he would remove all traces of himself.

“For what purpose was the dome constructed?” Crest asked,

continuing his line of questioning.

“As a refuge for the colonists.”

“What colonists? The humans did not find any traces of an Arkonide colony on their world.”

“The humans have limited capabilities. A great deal of time has passed since I was built.”

“How much?”

“Using the time calculations of Larsaf III, about ten thousand years.”

Ten thousand years. That was the time of the great war against the Methanes. This information explained why a refuge might have been needed. And it fit in with the statements of the Arkonide Kerlon, who Perry Rhodan had met on the Ferron moon, Lannol, in the Vega system—a very old man who had survived millennia with the help of deep sleep equipment. But at a very high cost, as it had turned Kerlon insane.

“Do you know the name Kerlon?” Crest asked on a hunch.

“Yes.”

“What do you know about him?”

“A common name among Arkonides...”

“No!” he said, interrupting the computer. “I mean a specific person. An officer in the protective fleet. You must know him!”

“I don’t remember,” the Positronic answered.

A refuge? Possible, but the elderly Arkonide had no way of exerting pressure on the Positronic. He would have to seek another way to find out more about the past.

“You are designed as a refuge, you say,” he continued. “Why is there a second refuge on Larsaf II, then?” He used the Arkonide

term for Venus.

“I don’t remember another refuge. But its existence would make sense. Larsaf II cannot sustain Arkonide life, making it a good place to hide from the Methanes. And it also makes sense that I know nothing of the existence of a second refuge. That way I cannot reveal it to anyone.”

“The refuge on Venus was abandoned,” Crest stated. With one exception, which he would mention in a minute. “We also found no Arkonides in this dome. Where are they?”

“I don’t know. I assume they are dead. A great deal of time has passed.”

“That is not an argument! There are cryonic sleeping stations in the dome.”

“That is correct.”

“They were not used! Why? An advance by the methane-breathers would have lasted days, or a maximum of weeks. It is not the habit of the Methanes to hang around.”

“Seen from this perspective, that is correct,” the Positronic confirmed.

“So why was that equipment installed?”

“The commander ordered it.”

Of course. He should have been able to answer that himself. But it still did not explain the reason for it. Why install complex systems geared towards surviving centuries or millennia for an emergency that would last months at most?

“And why were they not used, with one exception?” the Arkonide tried again.

“They were not needed.”

“That’s wrong. The colony was attacked and destroyed.” It was

the most logical explanation, and it fit with what Kerlon had reported. “The commander must have had other plans. Or was the commander a woman?”

The Positronic was not an organic being. It did not fall for Crest’s attempt to fool it. “I do not remember.”

“But you should. He is alive.”

“The commander is alive? What makes you think that?”

Did Crest detect a barely noticeable hesitation? Or had he only imagined it? “We found traces of DNA from several Arkonides.”

“One would expect nothing else. Why should that have any special importance?”

“Because the traces of an Arkonide are unique. The telomeres of the chromosomes are not shortened.”

“That is a very insightful piece of information,” the Positronic replied. “What does it mean?”

“Telomeres are the ends of the chromosomes. They guarantee the stability of the chromosomes. But every time the cell divides, they become a little shorter. If the telomere length becomes lower than a certain critical minimum, the cell can no longer divide. The organism dies. However, if the telomeres do not become shorter, then the organism does not die. The organism is immortal.”

If Crest’s bold explanation surprised the Positronic, it certainly wasn’t obvious. “What you speak of is impossible,” the Positronic said to the elderly Arkonide. “Immortality is not attainable for organic beings. It is a legend.”

Is it really? Crest thought. *Is there such a thing as “impossible”?*

“Your memory seems to be limited when it comes to the distant past,” he said loudly. “Let’s return to the very recent past. You let in a robot and his female companion, a half-Arkonide woman.”

“That is correct. I was authorized to do so.”

“Rico came from the Venus refuge.” Along with Thora, but that was of no importance at the moment. What was important was that the robot had been destroyed during the act to release Crest from the violent clutches of the mutant Clifford Monterny. At least that’s the way it had looked. However, Rico had regenerated himself out of his own ruins. He had led the humans to the dome before the Azores, accompanied by Quiniu Soptor, a half-Arkonide woman who had been part of the *Aetron’s* crew.

“That is possible,” the Positronic admitted. “The decisive thing for me was that I was authorized to let him in.”

“How so? Who authorized him? The commander?”

The computer gave Crest the answer he was expecting, “I don’t remember.”

“Are Rico and his companion still in the dome?”

“No.”

“How did they leave the dome?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do. They used a transmitter.”

“You mean a device that is capable of relocating material in zero time through hyper space to a second transmitter at another location?” the Positronic asked.

“Yes.”

“Their existence is nothing more than a legend.”

Like immortality, Crest thought. *And transmitters exist!*

“There is a transmitter in the dome,” Crest stated.

And Rico and Quiniu Soptor had fled from the humans using this device. Why? Crest knew so little about Rico that he wasn’t even able to speculate on what had happened. But he knew Quiniu

Soptor. She had belonged to the crew of the *Aetron*. Why had she gone through the transmitter? Soptor must have found out that he and Thora had joined forces with the humans. So why had she fled? Crest could think of only one explanation, and that was that Soptor believed she would find something at another location that was worth taking a risk for. And what could that have been if it not immortality?

"I know nothing of a transmitter here," Positronic answered. "And I know about everything that happens within the dome."

"Unless, of course, you've forgotten it." Crest could not hold back the sarcastic comment. "Show me a map!"

A holo immediately lit up in front of Crest. He zoomed in, navigating to the desired position using his hands. Then he pointed with his finger to a small, inconspicuous room. "What is this room used for?"

"Storing spare parts."

"That was its original use. Show me the room." Another holo appeared. It showed an enlarged view of the room—and the transmitter. "What kind of device is that in the middle of the room?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the Positronic answered.

"Don't lie to me!" Against his better judgment, Crest was becoming angry. Nothing was impossible for Positronics, with one exception—they were unable to lie.

"You know I am not capable of that," the computer pointed out.

"So why can you not see what I can? Why can't you see what you're showing me right now? Why—"

"Am I interrupting something?" a voice said from behind Crest's back in English.

The Arkonide whirled around in his seat. A human had entered

the control center unnoticed. He was middle-aged, wearing cargo pants with wide, baggy pockets, a leather waistcoat, and a wide-brimmed hat that the humans referred to as a “cowboy hat.”

“Mister Aescunnar? What are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” The human smiled. “I suppose there are too many questions flying around my head. I thought that a walk might help.”

Cyr Aescunnar had been in the dome for two months. Homer G. Adams had urged them to bring him on board. Aescunnar described himself as a historian, even if he was unable to present any degree certificates, which the humans placed a lot of value on. Crest did not know whether that made him any less qualified. One thing he was sure of was that Aescunnar was unusually intelligent, and persistent.

“Same with me,” Crest said.

“Is the Positronic being stubborn?” Aescunnar pointed at the holos.

“More stubborn than an Earthly mule,” the Arkonide man replied. Aescunnar had once told him about the obstinate beasts of burden that had often held up his expeditions.

The historian laughed. “Then perhaps it’s time to turn to a living being?” he said, winking at Crest.

“Like an insatiably curious human like you, for example?”

“For example.” Aescunnar brought over one of the contour seats, sat down in it without looking, and said, “I can’t get yesterday’s discussion out of my head. How can it be that the Arkonides established a base, or even a colony, on Earth ten thousand years ago but did not leave behind any traces?” He took a tablet out of his pocket and retrieved an image file. “Maybe you want to look at this, Crest. It’s a gravestone that was found in Palenque in present-day Mexico…”

3.

Perry Rhodan

Gol, in the Vega System

"Any response?" Rhodan asked without taking his eyes off the wreck of the Topsidian spaceship. The fuselage seemed as if it were no more than an arm's length away. Rhodan had landed the *Panerc* less than ten meters from the ship's bow.

"No reaction," Bull said. "I've played through all the frequencies communicated by the Ferron military, as well as those the Wise One, Trker-Hon, gave to us."

Mists of poisonous gas wafted upward, blocking Rhodan's view of the spaceship's bow. It was a reminder of where they were located, and that they had no time to lose. There wasn't even the slightest breeze in the valley, but that could change at any moment.

"Chaktor, what have you been able to find out?"

"The infrared detector measures temperatures of nine to twenty-two degrees on most sections of the ship. One exception is the central sphere, where it is much hotter with temperatures reaching into the four-digit range." The eyes of the Ferron man, which were very deep set anyway, had become so narrow that Rhodan could not interpret his expression.

"That means two things," Rhodan said. "The fuselage has, at best, only cracked in some places. And at least one reactor continues to be active and is supplying the life-support systems."

"Yes, that would make sense," Chaktor agreed.

"Were you able to find out where the noises were coming from?" The Ferrons had superior listening abilities.

"You mean the noises from crew members? No."

Rhodan looked questioningly first at Bull, then at Chaktor. His friend nodded. The Ferron made a gesture of confirmation, albeit a tentative one.

"Okay, let's take a look at the ship."

A bright orange gangway unfolded and crawled across the ground like a snake before it suctioned onto the fuselage of the Topsidian spaceship. It was one of the basic pieces of equipment they had on board the *Panerc* and was used to establish pressure-tight connections between vehicles in a vacuum. It had to be very tear-resistant, of course, but Rhodan didn't have the slightest doubt that it would rip to shreds if hit by a single gust on Gol. Nevertheless, he allowed Chaktor to get on with it. The gangway was of great psychological value for their Ferron companion, as it meant that Chaktor did not have to set foot on the world of the ghosts.

Chaktor had drawn both ray guns, and he turned constantly while walking across the short distance to the other ship. Clouds of gas wafted slowly past them, their shadows leaving patterns on the hard material that the ship was made of. Chaktor followed their movements so that he could shoot them if they turned out to be ghosts.

The gangway ended at a hatch. Bull started turning the wheel that was mounted in the ship's bow with his hand. All his efforts were in vain.

Rhodan cleared his throat and hissed out a long sentence in Topsidian. He had learned it from the Wise One, Trker-Hon, who had played an important role in settling the war between the Topsidans and the Ferrons. The words were an instruction that the Wise One had described—with an openness Rhodan would never have expected from a lizard-being—as the twelfth sentence of the eleven sentences of the Social Directive. "Recognize the distress. Act. Open mind, heart, and the gate to he who is in distress!"

The elderly Topsidan with the eye patch had assured him that these words would give him access to all their ships. Rhodan found it hard to believe that the same creatures who had attacked the

Ferrons, devastated their planets, and murdered tens or even hundreds of thousands, were capable of such unselfish emotions. But he also knew that he could trust Trker-Hon. The Wise One was an unusual being.

Something automatic came to life with a buzz. The hatch slid to one side, revealing an airlock that was big enough for the two humans and the Ferron. They stepped into it, and Rhodan and Bull drew their weapons. Air hissed into the chamber, and the inner hatch opened, allowing them to see into a type of vestibule. Spacesuits and other pieces of equipment were hanging on the wall on holders. The chamber was deserted.

Bull looked around and found a node on the wall that was part of the onboard network. He pulled a multi-tool out of the thigh pocket of his battledress, knelt down, and started loosening the casing. Chaktor was constantly turning around on his heels as if afraid that the ghosts of Gol would attack him if he stood still for more than a second.

"For God's sake, Chaktor!" Bull snapped at him. "Stop dancing around and help me!"

Chaktor turned towards his friend, looking like he was about to jump him. Then he realized that Bull was just trying to help him overcome his fear. He went over, laid down both weapons, and started pulling at the casing.

"The atmosphere is breathable," the Positronic on Rhodan's suit announced. "An oxygen-hydrogen mix with low concentrations of inert gasses just as the Topsidans like it. Temperature: 12.3 degrees. Artificial gravity at Topsidian level of 1.3 Gravos. I recommend opening your helmets to save air."

"Recommendation rejected," Rhodan responded. They were not intending to spend much time on Gol. And even if Rhodan did not believe in the ghosts of the Ferrons, he had not lost sight of the fact that they were in a hostile environment. The stability on board the crashed Topsidian spaceship was fragile. The heavy gravity on Gol, together with the high atmospheric pressure, could destroy them at any time.

Sparks hissed through the air as Bull aimed a ray of energy at the casing. Rhodan saw all this out of the corner of his eye as he tried to measure what the instruments on his battledress couldn't—the mood on board the Topsidian ship. He felt that something wasn't quite right. But why?

The casing dropped to the floor with a clunk. Bull placed his hands on his hips, then he pulled a cable out of a pocket and pushed it into the smoking opening in the wall. The tip of the cable had hardly disappeared into the wall when it started wriggling forward like a snake. The cable was seeking contact.

The sensors in the battledress registered the smoke and guided the smell over to Rhodan. It was surprisingly familiar to him, reminding him of the long Saturday afternoons he had spent at his uncle Karl's place. His uncle often spent his Saturdays lying under his jacked-up car in his garage, welding the undercarriage.

"Bingo!" Bull murmured. "Contact has been established!"

Later on in the evening, he and his uncle had watched films together. Films about the Second World War, which was a topic of particular interest for Karl...

Rhodan jolted upright as he suddenly realized what was making him feel uncomfortable. He had expected the crashed Topsidian spaceship to remind him of a smashed-up submarine in one of the films he had watched with his uncle. A fuselage creaking under the weight and pressure of the heavy gravity. Dull lighting. The smell of mold in the stifling, stale air. A crew left mercilessly to suffocate.

But none of that was the case. *What...*

"I thought so!" Bull called out.

"What is it?" Rhodan said, turning to his friend.

"The computer is dead, as are all the backup systems." The face of his friend was unrecognizable. Reg was displaying the data that his suit's Positronic was generating from the connection on the inside of his helmet. "Only the basic functions are intact."

“How can that be?” Chaktor interjected. He stood up, and grabbed his weapons again. “If the damage is so great, they should also have failed.”

“Yes, they should have,” Bull agreed. “But they haven’t. I guess that’s one of the strengths of the Topsidian design. Trker-Hon told me about it. It has similarities to the structure of the brain in most intelligent people. There are several layers, the lowest one being the brainstem. Highly robust and hard to kill, like with the *Nesbitt-Breck*.”

“With the what?”

“*Nesbitt-Breck*. That was the name of the ship. ‘Twinkling Star.’” Bull pulled a face. “Who would have thought our lizard friends could be so poetic.”

“Do you have an explanation for the state of the ship?” Rhodan asked him.

“Not yet. But I’ll let you know once we’ve seen it in its entirety. Will that do?”

“That’ll do.”

They went deeper in. The airlock through which they had entered it was close to the bow, so they turned towards the direction of the central sphere. Rhodan’s battledress transmitted a message of peace both acoustically and on the frequencies known to the Topsidian fleet. *“We are friends! We have come to help you!”*

Chaktor moved to the head of the group, both weapons drawn, until Rhodan admonished him. “Chaktor, put your guns away! We’re not here to start a fight!”

The Ferron man hesitated.

Rhodan spoke again, “And do you seriously believe that ghosts would be scared off by everyday ray guns?”

Chaktor reluctantly put the weapons back in their holsters. He was afraid. Only his respect for Rhodan, the Bringer of the Light,

made him comply.

A very straight corridor led to the central sphere. It was surrounded by doors, all of them standing open. The two humans and the Ferron searched every room. Most of them were the living quarters for the crew, all deserted. Belongings were lying around on the floor, dislodged from their usual places when the ship had crashed. Rhodan couldn't shake off the feeling that the crew members would return at any minute.

Right in front of the central sphere was a hangar. It, too, was empty. Colored markings on the floor indicated space for three auxiliary craft.

"That explains a great deal," Bull said. He knelt down and rubbed the long grooves in the steel—which must have come from the runners of the auxiliary craft—with his finger. Bull was like a hunter testing for traces of his prey. "The crew managed to get out of here on time."

"Probably," Rhodan agreed. "Or they retreated to the control center. During the fighting on the ground, the Topsidans removed many of the auxiliary craft as a way of breaking the Ferron resistance."

Bull pulled a face again. "That's a lovely thought—to be stuck in a crashing ship with no escape because the Supreme Command had taken away the auxiliary craft."

"I believe humans have an expression for that." Chaktor made a hissing sound. "Poetic justice!" The Ferron turned away. "Let's continue!"

The central sphere initially seemed to be undamaged. The ship's control center was located in its armored interior. As with Arkonide ships, it was designed as a place of refuge for the crew. In it, they had a chance of surviving the ship's destruction. The hollow sphere of the transition drive stretched all the way around the control center, and it took up practically the entire remaining volume of that section of the ship. Corridors used for maintenance led through the exterior areas.

They went along one such corridor, and that's where they found the reason the *Nesbitt-Breck* had crashed. The shot from the beamer cannons had torn the fuselage open, creating a hole that was more than ten by ten meters, as the instruments on their battledress informed them. The hit was exactly at the seam between the spherical part and the rear. The *Nesbitt-Breck* was now lying on that section, which is why they had not been able to see the damage before.

Somebody had tried to repair the hole. It had been hurriedly covered, and steel supports ensured the fuselage's stability.

"Rough," Bull commented. "No auxiliary craft, and then a hit by your own people."

"That's what I call war," Rhodan answered. He turned around and studied the wall that covered the transition drive. "But at least the shot didn't get as far as the translight drive."

"Luckily. Otherwise our trip to hell would have been for nothing."

"The ghosts! It's the ghosts!" Chaktor gasped for air. He made a kind of panting sound, which was how the Ferrons cooled down, as they didn't have any sweat glands. But Chaktor wasn't cold. The panic made his pulse race.

"Nonsense!" Bull said. He went up to one of the struts and knocked on the roughly welded seam. "This is the work of survivors who tried to save what they could."

"Oh yeah? Then why is the computer dead?" Chaktor's face looked even paler than it had during the approach to Gol. "That can't be explained by a hole in the fuselage! And why does the crew not respond to our radio messages? And why haven't we found one single Topsidan?"

"Part of the thermal energy will have spread out as a shockwave, continued through the ship's wiring, and damaged the computer." Bull walked towards his Ferron companion, intending to lay a comforting hand on his shoulder, but he stopped when Chaktor

stiffened. He continued calmly. “We haven’t searched the entire ship yet. The control center is the safest place on board. That’s—”

“Nowhere is safe from the ghosts!”

“Well, I haven’t seen any.”

“You—”

“Stop!” Rhodan said, intervening. Bull and Chaktor already knew each other well and had become something like comrades. But comrades could sometimes fall out. “It’s nothing but wild speculation. We’ll proceed to the control center and then we’ll see. Okay?”

He didn’t get an answer, but nobody contradicted him either. Rhodan started moving, while Bull and Chaktor followed him silently. They walked down the maintenance corridor without finding any more damage, and then finally reached the hatch that separated them from the control center.

Bull found another nodal point on the wall and started fiddling around with it. He looked at Chaktor, a question in his eyes, but the Ferron ignored him. He was standing, his legs spread out, in front of the hatch. He held both weapons at the ready and aimed at the opening from around hip height. A flicker surrounded his stocky figure as he activated his protective shield.

Chaktor was acting out of fear, but also rationally. Rhodan drew his weapon and activated his own shield. Anyone who had not yet heard their message of peace would probably not be in the mood to talk.

“Okay!” Bull said. “I’ve got the mechanism.”

The hatch moved agonizingly slowly as it slid to one side. Chaktor let out a scream and forced himself through the slit. Rhodan followed him. The Ferron man whirled around in the control center, ready to shoot at anything that moved. But he found nothing to aim at.

The control center was deserted, empty of both Topsidans and

ghosts.

6.

Crest da Zoltral

Before the Azores

"Warning—my outer shell is under attack! The structural stability of my fuselage is at risk!"

The voice was well-modulated and reminiscent of an Arkonide of high position who had gone through the best schools of the Imperium. But it was lacking the hard-to-achieve tangible modicum of real emotion, which revealed that it was the voice of a machine.

"Your fears are exaggerated," Crest said, contradicting the Positronic of the underwater dome. "We are located about a hundred meters below the ocean floor. Beyond the outer wall is a massive rock face."

"If that is the case, what is your purpose here?" The computer was not going to give up easily. "The consequences are unforeseeable!"

It didn't make any sense to discuss things further with the Positronic. Crest turned to the young woman standing next to him. "Miss Colas, your opinion?"

"I am absolutely sure. The scent leads to this wall. I can smell it!"

Could he trust her? Ariane Colas was young and inexperienced. The path she had taken in life thus far was questionable, just like her character, if you believed the rumors. The Arkonide studied the girl. Her brash LED eyelashes changed color with a hectic rhythm. What did rumors tell you about anyone?

"Dubious" is how Crest's opponents had often described her—and that was the politest of their numerous accusations and insults. "Fickle" and "superficial" were the words used by one young

mutant woman. Now Crest was standing in front of her for the first time, and the calm certainty that Ariane Colas exuded impressed him.

"Mister Sengu?" he said, turning to the second person accompanying him.

"Ariane is right," the small, stocky man answered. "There is something hidden behind this wall."

Crest had come to know Wuriu Sengu as a quiet, contemplative person—a temperament you would expect to clash with the bubbly Ariane Colas. But that was obviously not the case. Had he been wrong? Perhaps the gelled spikes in Wuriu's hair hinted at an aspect of his character that the Japanese man wasn't even aware of himself?

"What can you see behind the wall?"

"I *see* rock," Wuriu answered. "However, thanks to the mental connection that I formed with Ariane, my perception was expanded. I smelled an unknown Arkonide. His scent leads to this wall, and through it!"

Crest stroked his cheeks pensively with his fingers. Two humans with inexplicable gifts and diffuse, inexplicable perceptions. On Arkon they would have been laughed at. But Arkon was far away, and he, Crest da Zoltral, was on a search for which his fellow Arkonides would have called him insane. What, then, could be more fitting than to follow feelings that were a little crazy?

The elderly Arkonide turned to the maintenance robot they had brought with them. It was made of a solid column that was just under two meters high, with six arms growing out of it. The arms ended in welding devices.

"Robot, create an opening in the wall!" Crest pointed to the place on the wall that, according to the mutants, was where the scent led to.

The machine hovered silently towards the wall and started doing

what Crest had ordered. It spread its arms out. Glowing rays immediately shot out of all the welding devices, breaking through the Arkonide steel.

Hot air blew like a gust of wind across Crest's face. Then the helmet of his battledress folded up, closing him off from the outside world. The process happened so fast that it was not discernible to the human—or the Arkonide—eye. Anyone looking on would have thought the helmet had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

Crest was surrounded by a flickering as the Positronic in his suit activated his protective shield. As soon as that happened, the battledress turned into a perfect self-contained world.

Crest thought about Arkon. A tenacious subculture, the Autarkists, had existed there for centuries. Their supporters spent their entire lives in the hermetically sealed artificial world of the battledress. It was a life fully without risks of any kind. Accidents, even murder attempts, were practically impossible, and they could not be infected by outside pathogens either. The Autarkists lived to very old ages in their cocoons. Some of them even believed that their lifestyle could make them immortal.

Crest doubted that the biology of the Arkonides could be tricked in this way. And even if that was unexpectedly the outcome, one question still remained—what for? Why live forever when your eternal life meant you had to exist hermetically sealed off from life?

The robot created a large, elliptical opening in the wall. Its progress was slow despite working with all six arms simultaneously. The melting point of Arkon steel was much higher than any material that humans had processed on Earth to date.

Crest was feeling quite nervous as he watched the robot work. His fingers tingled, and he knew he was on to something big. He could feel it. Just like back then, when he had tracked down the lost Epetrans archive on Arkon.

The robot's work was soon finished. The glowing tongues of the welding machine died down, and the robot extended suction pads from the end of its arms. With smacking noises, they suctioned onto

the wall surface. One strong pull and the robot had extracted the circle of steel it had carved into the wall. It swung round and laid the elliptical section of metal carefully on the ground. The steel was as thick as a lower arm.

The inflow of water that the Positronic had warned them about didn't happen. But that was no surprise to Crest. If the ocean was waiting behind the exterior wall of the station, steam would have been created almost as soon as they had started.

Crest started floating, carried by the anti-grav neutralisers in his battledress, towards the opening in the wall. Its edges were still smoldering, providing him with some light.

He saw the rock face. And in the rock there was an opening.

His suit's spotlight lit up. The circle of light it emitted penetrated the opening, revealing a tunnel that led diagonally downwards. At a distance that Crest reckoned to be about a hundred meters, the tunnel descended at a much steeper angle.

"A tunnel!" Wuriu called out. "I couldn't see into it before!"

He was now floating alongside Crest. The Arkonide thought he detected suppressed indignation in his voice. The mutant, who could see through solids, was not used to anything eluding his powers.

"The instruments haven't registered it!" Ariane Colas said.

Crest activated the rangefinder display and realized the young woman was right. "Yes, but to be honest, anything else would have greatly surprised me."

"But I can smell the scent!" she girl exclaimed. "The Arkonide went through this tunnel!"

Crest addressed the station's Positronic, and issued an order. Shortly after, an autonomous transporter rolled up. It was one of several dozen they had found in the dome. There was a cable drum on its loading platform. He took the end of the cable and placed it in one of the maintenance robot's six arms.

“Push forward into the tunnel!” he ordered the robot. “Do not let go of this cable under any circumstance.”

“Understood.”

The robot was about to start moving, but Crest held him back. “We will be using this cable for communication purposes.”

“That isn’t necessary,” the robot responded. “I have radio contact.”

“Even if it’s unlikely, if the radio connection fails for some reason, we can still stay in touch. Follow the tunnel as far as you can. Then give us a sign. Two short tugs on the cable means ‘Everything’s okay,’ four tugs mean ‘Danger! Do not follow!’ Understand?”

“Your instructions are clear and logical.”

The robot hovered into the tunnel. It glided slowly along the walkway, then suddenly disappeared from view where the tunnel angled downward. The battledress rangefinder lost him immediately. Wuriu tried in vain to establish radio contact with the robot.

The cable rolled off the drum smoothly and at a steady pace.

“Clever,” Ariane Colas said. “An old Arkonide trick?”

“It’s something we might have devised,” Crest answered. His left hand enclosed the cable so that he could feel it if the robot tried to send him a message. “But, I have to admit it’s an early human trick. I allowed myself to be inspired by Ariadne’s thread.”

“What’s that?”

“An old legend. Ariadne was a Minoan princess. She gave the hero Theseus a golden thread. Theseus unrolled it as he went deeper and deeper into the labyrinth where a monster called the Minotaur lived. He defeated the Minotaur, and thanks to the thread, he found his way back out.” He looked sideways at the cable drum to make sure it was rolling evenly, then he looked at the mutant

girl. “By the way, your name originates from the legendary Ariadne. Ariane is the French form. Both have the same meaning—“sweet one.”

“That…” The young woman turned red, and her LED lashes dimmed. “I’ve never heard that before. You, an Arkonide, know more about the history of our world than I do. I... I don’t even know what my own name means. I should be ashamed.” She turned her head to avoid his gaze.

“You have no reason to feel that way. Nobody can know everything. And don’t forget, I am a fragile old man. Only my curiosity has remained young. Sometimes my only option is to travel in my thoughts. I read a great deal.”

Crest concentrated on the cable again, as it could serve as a communication channel free of interference and could not be intercepted. It had markings on it that measured length. Two hundred meters of cable were soon gone, then five hundred. Just before the eight hundred mark slipped through Crest’s fingers, the cable stopped moving. Nothing happened for several seconds, then the Arkonide felt it tighten as two short tugs came. The signal that everything was okay!

“The robot has reached the end of the tunnel.” Crest let go of the cable. “I’ll follow him. You two have to choose whether you want to remain here or not. I don’t know what dangers might be lurking down there.”

Ariane Colas shook her head. “How can you even ask such a question? I’m young, and I’m curious!” She winked at Crest, and her LED eyelashes emphasized the gesture by flaring up cheekily. The mutant girl was like a child; she became easily dejected but bounded back again full of joy just as fast.

“I’m coming too,” was all Wuriu said. The Japanese man’s face showed little emotion. All that Crest was able to tell was that Wuriu had chosen the length of the spikes in his hair very carefully, making sure there was enough space left between them and the inside of the helmet.

The Arkonide and the two humans floated into the tunnel. Wuriu wanted to be up front, but Crest pushed his way forward with the help of a thrust from his pulsator drive. Being at the head of the group was the most risky position, but the Arkonide thought it appropriate that he be at the front. *Leadership means leading by example.*

Crest laughed quietly to himself as he realized who that thought came from—Perry Rhodan.

"Crest, is everything okay?" Ariane Colas asked, a note of worry in her voice.

"Yes. It just occurred to me that I'm a lousy Arkonide."

The two humans didn't ask why he thought that was so funny. The brightly illuminated ellipse was moving farther and farther behind them, ultimately disappearing as the tunnel started to become considerably steeper. Crest studied the walls. The tunnel had been dug with the help of disintegrators. The melt channels and smooth edges clearly revealed that. However, it had been done shoddily. The tunnel had not been dug by a machine, but by organic beings.

Arkonides? That seemed likely. But the real question was, why? The underwater dome was a refuge, a hiding place. Why create a hiding place within a hiding place? Had the colony's commander, who was omnipresent in the dome and yet hard to grasp in any tangible way, feared a mutiny among his people? Or had those under his protection turned on him? Crest found that hard to believe. The wars against the Methanes had almost driven the Arkonides to their downfall. Was it not logical that, in such situations, conventions and truths suffered?

Something extremely bright flared up, blinding Crest despite the fact that his helmet darkened automatically to protect his eyes. He raised his arms, holding them protectively before his eyes in a gesture that was in vain. He heard the two humans let out a scream behind him.

"Thermo-beamer attack," the suit Positronic said with a sense of

calm that was fully inappropriate under the circumstances. Crest was enveloped by flashes of lightning as his protective shield absorbed the energy blasts hitting him. “What are you waiting for?” he snapped at the Positronic. “Carry out evasive action!”

“Impossible,” it answered. “We are being held in place by restraining fields. I’m redirecting all available energy to the shield.”

“But we have to get out of here!” Crest yelled. His helmet had darkened again, dampening the bright flares to a degree that the eye could withstand.

“Shield capacity at eighty-nine percent,” the suit’s Positronic said. “The strain on it is increasing.”

Crest somehow managed to turn around. The two humans were right behind him. Wuriu was just standing there, as if what was happening had nothing to do with him. Ariane had lifted both arms and was holding them in front of her face. She was screaming shrilly, and her words were incomprehensible.

“Ninety-four percent,” the Positronic said.

Sweat was dripping from every pore of Crest’s body. Was it fear? Or was the heat already penetrating his overworked shield, causing his suit to warm up?

“Ninety-seven percent.”

The shield generator started whining, drowning out the young woman’s shrill screams of fear.

“Ninety-nine percent,” the Positronic said.

Crest realized he was going to die. There was no escape. The elderly Arkonide accepted this fact with a sense of inner peace that surprised even him.

“99.6 percent.”

Was it the wisdom of age? Or had he become accustomed to death after surviving the attacks against him on Arkon? Or was it

simply resignation? Was he giving up?

“One hundred percent.”

The whining of the shield generator was now more like a howling sound, and it hurt hisears. The suit had reached its limits. It was a technical device, Crest suddenly remembered, that was ancient—ten thousand Earth years old.

“Stress level is constant,” the Positronic said.

Ten thousand years. As old as this complex. And much older than he was—he who was seeking eternal life and now faced death in a tunnel below the ocean of a distant and primitive world. He...

The bright flares stopped. The howling of the shield generator increased to a new level, as if the aggregate couldn’t believe what had happened. Then it too stopped abruptly.

Silence. Unbelievable silence.

“Wh... What was that?” Wuriu asked.

“A security measure against unauthorized entry, I assume,” Crest replied. His fear of death had immediately been replaced by certainty. His right hand moved to his upper thigh, balled itself into a fist, and punched his leg. He felt it, but it didn’t hurt. The suit had absorbed the impact—but he *had* felt it. He was alive.

“We’re alive,” his Japanese companion said at the exact same moment. “Why? We’re not authorized. My shield was at a hundred percent capacity. A few watts more, and—”

“We would have been toast, as the people of Earth say,” Crest finished. A thought came to him. Their suits were ten thousand years old. Just like this complex. Their suits came from the *Tosoma*, just like whoever built this tunnel. Therefore...

“It was a test!” Crest realized. “Access control.”

“And...and did we pass?” Ariane asked.

“Obviously.” Crest took a deep breath. He suddenly felt very happy. They had passed! “Should we continue?”

“Onwards!” the two humans answered in unison.

They started moving farther down the tunnel. The cable that was supposed to lead them back to their starting point had melted. But Crest wasn’t worried. This wasn’t a labyrinth, like the place Theseus had found in the legend. The tests they would have to pass here were of another kind.

They reached the robot without further incident. It was intact and had stopped before a hatch made of Arkon steel. It slid to one side to let them past.

“Mr. Sengu, would you be so kind?”

The human understood immediately. He took Ariane’s hand to form a mental link with her. Then he closed his eyes and concentrated on his power.

What might they find behind this hatch? A secret second control center? The real station? Was the dome there to fool enemies, diverting their attention from the fact that the true refuge was hidden deep in the ocean floor? Or—what a crazy idea—was the commander perhaps waiting for them behind the hatch? The man who wanted to be immortal?

Crest heard a humming noise behind him and the robot said, “Step aside, Crest!”

The Arkonide turned around. The machine had slid into the middle of the tunnel, its arms now extended. The ends of the welding devices glowed red. It obviously planned to force the hatch open.

“Not yet, robot,” Crest said. “We’ll try first to open the hatch on our own.”

“You misunderstand me.” The robot did not move. “It’s the two humans. They are not authorized. Step aside so that I can eliminate them.”

For a moment, Crest couldn't believe his ears. What did the robot think it was doing? Then he suddenly understood. It belonged to the dome, to this complex, just like the hidden tunnel!

"No!" he said in a determined tone against his better judgment. "I forbid it! They are my companions."

"You have proved that you have authorization, Crest da Zoltral, but you do not have the right to issue orders. Step aside or I must eliminate you!" As if to underscore what he was saying, the robot allowed the glowing ends of the welding devices to flare up briefly.

Crest turned his head and looked at the two humans. They had not noticed the robot's threats as they concentrated deeply on their mental link.

They were as good as dead. Crest had nothing to fight the machine with. And why should he anyway? All he had to do was to step to one side to stay alive. He could explain away their deaths to the humans as an unfortunate accident.

A few weeks ago, the Arkonide would only have hesitated for a second. Not without some regret over the deaths of the humans, but he would have accepted it as a necessary evil while weighing things up and reaching a clear decision.

But that Crest da Zoltral no longer existed. His arrogance had disappeared during the six weeks of lingering infirmity on the Moon. On Earth, among the primitive barbarians, it had died completely. Humans, not Arkonides, had saved his life. He was indebted to them.

The elderly alien turned back to the robot. He placed both hands on his hips and said, "No! I will not allow that. The two humans are my friends. If you want to eliminate them, you must eliminate me too!"

Tears welled up in his eyes, blurring his vision. The robot's arms extended fully and then moved back into their holders in its body. The red glow of the welding devices faded.

“You have proven that you possess maturity and courage, Crest da Zoltral,” the robot said. “You and your companions are granted entry.”

A creaking noise made him whirl round. The two humans let out cries of astonishment as the hatch moved to the side, letting them see beyond it.

Wuriu signaled to Ariane. The two humans stepped aside, and the Japanese man indicated that the Arkonide should go first.

Crest stepped through the hatch and entered another world. A hall opened up before him. It was...what? A treasure trove? The grave of an earthly prince? The props room of a theater?

“What the hell is that?” Sengu, who was now standing next to him, whispered.

Crest’s eyes wandered across the hall. He saw armor, shields and swords, parchment maps and dusty books, glittering jewels and hand-crafted objects, as well as roughly processed everyday items.

“To be honest, I don’t know.” Crest took a deep breath, tasting the air. The receptors in his battledress transmitted these sensory perceptions and Crest smelled the odor of past millennia. “But I think I know someone who can help us.”

7.

Perry Rhodan

Earth

September 14, 2036

The *Tosoma* tumbled towards the Earth.

Lesly K. Pounder, the commander of the Arkonide battleship they had found on the floor of the Atlantic, did nothing to stop their fall. The ship experienced waves of heavy vibrations as it came into contact with the outer layers of the atmosphere. As the air grew thicker, the friction made the fuselage glow. From the ground, the *Tosoma* must have looked like a star falling from the sky. A star that was brighter than the midday sun across Central Asia.

Rhodan followed its flight path from the edge of the control center. Lesly Pounder, former Flight Director of NASA and Rhodan's mentor, was a man who generally gave his all and a great deal more to the fulfillment of his duties. Whether through the endless arguing with the American Congress about the budget for the space agency in his plan to shoot Rhodan and his comrades in a not fully secure prototype to the Moon to find out why the American station there had ceased communications, or by commanding a steel monster with a diameter of eight hundred meters that, until a few weeks ago, was far beyond anything humans would have dared to imagine possible.

Pounder had taken up position in the middle of the control center. "The old boy" was how everyone at NASA referred to him but only when they were absolutely sure he wasn't within hearing range. A hard taskmaster with a big heart. He was in his mid-fifties, had a few pounds too many around his midriff, and carried in his heart the eternal pain of the death of his wife and children, who had had a car accident not far from Cape Canaveral that none of them had survived.

Pounder had lost some weight over the past weeks, making him look ten years younger. He gave the impression of a man who had been alleviated of a heavy burden. He had left NASA with its reams of antiquated bureaucratic red tape and become a space traveler himself. The stars belonged to him.

The crew of the *Tosoma* loved their Commander. Most of them, like Pounder, were former astronauts from half a dozen nations, former soldiers from the Chinese People's Liberation Army, former engineers and bankers, blue collar and white collar workers. People who had burned all their bridges behind them to begin a new life. Pounder—a perfectionist—had worked on them for a whole month. And now they commanded the ship with an ease as if they had been flying it for decades.

Rhodan sensed an even vibration coming from the ground. At the same time, he heard a continuous thundering sound some distance away. Pounder had fired the impulse drives. Sixteen in total, arranged at regular intervals around the equatorial ring that circled the ship's fuselage. The drives were now throttling the absurdly high speed of the *Tosoma*.

It was an extravagant maneuver, but it had become necessary because of the ship's uncontrolled fall. The *Tosoma* naturally had anti-grav projectors, and if the ship had approached the Earth at a lower speed, the projectors would have carried it, floating gently down towards Earth as if it were a gas-filled balloon. And it would have done so with a fraction of the energy. But also with a fraction of the effect.

Someone relayed an exterior camera onto the large holo that was hovering below the ceiling of the control center. The glow—as bright as the sun—created contours that were so sharp they didn't look real, revealing the silhouette of their booty. It was shaped like a long torpedo that had a sphere growing out of its middle and looked a little as if someone had shot an arrow through an apple, which had then gotten stuck half way through.

The *Nesbitt-Breck*. The Topsidian ship they had freed from the hell of Gol was attached to the fuselage of the *Tosoma* by way of tractor beams that were invisible to the human eye. The other ship

would have been able to land on its own, but Pounder and Bull wouldn't dream of that. Bull had insisted the refurbishment of the board computer was nowhere near ready to allow for such a maneuver.

Rhodan had said nothing, although he knew perfectly well it was just an excuse. The *Nesbitt-Breck* was their booty. And, as such, Bull and Pounder were eager to present it to humanity.

An endless surface of brown and gray shadows stretched out below the *Tosoma*. The Gobi Desert. Inhospitable, mostly devoid of humans. The outline of a salt lake emerged from the brown. There was a city on its banks—the city that Rhodan had founded two-and-a-half months earlier: Terrania.

Rhodan was relieved to see that the charred surface, which came right up to the edges of the city on the side facing away from the lake, had disappeared. Ivan Goratschin had unleashed his murderous powers there a few weeks ago. The goal of the mutant with the ability to mentally ignite fires had been the large Fantan ship. Goratschin had triggered several atomic explosions. None of them had endangered the ship, but they had laid waste to the desert. Yet, all traces of what had happened were gone now. Sand storms had covered the wounds caused by his power. And by a stroke of sheer luck, the winds had carried the radioactive sand away from Terrania.

"There's nothing that feels quite as good as returning home," Rhodan heard a voice say. "Am I right?" The voice spoke English but with a hard, Russian-sounding accent, and it was unusually deep.

Rhodan turned his head. Malikk, the first ambassador of the Ferrons, had stepped up beside him. He had learned English from the former cosmonaut Daria Morosova, who had remained in the Vega System as an ambassador for humanity.

"Yes, it is," Rhodan agreed. "Especially as I doubted more than once over the past few weeks that I would ever see it again."

Malikk nodded silently, an Earthly gesture that he used

consciously. He was a middle-aged Ferron man, a former envoy of the Thort and therefore an experienced diplomat who had mediated between the many tribes and peoples who populated Vega.

Malikk was the real freight in the *Tosoma*. More than a thousand Ferrons accompanied him to set up an embassy for their people on Earth. The inhabitants of Vega brought their know-how and technology with them. It was humble compared to what the Arkonides had to offer, but in comparison to Earth's current technology, it was still impressive. And, unlike the fantastic technology of the Arkonides, Ferron technology was within their reach. As a former test pilot and astronaut, Rhodan was a realist when it came to technological matters. The way that Pounder and his team commanded the *Tosoma* clearly showed that humans knew how to operate Arkonide technology. However, understanding it as a whole, or even building ships like the *Tosoma*, was something else altogether.

"Is it your city?" Malikk asked.

"Terrania? Yes, it's my home."

"I took a precise look at the Earth during our flight," Malikk said. "It is a small but remarkably diverse world. This desert doesn't seem to be the best place for a capital city."

Rhodan studied Malikk with a certain curiosity. Ferrons were surprisingly similar to humans but nevertheless an enigma. He thought about Thorta, the capital city of the Ferrons. Several planets and moons were governed from there. The city must have had about a hundred million inhabitants. There was nothing like it on Earth. Greater Tokyo, China's Pearl River Conglomerate, the Central European conurbations all faded to insignificance compared to Thorta.

Terrania had less than a million inhabitants. Most of them still lived in the tent cities that were grouped around the inner hub. Mustn't it be disappointing for Malikk?

Rhodan pushed that thought from his mind. "You are right," he said. "At first glance, the desert might seem unsuitable. But for

what I had in mind, it was the perfect spot. We had to bring the *Stardust* to a remote place with Crest. That was the only way to assert ourselves against Earth's superpowers, to end the discord among humanity."

The Ferron Ambassador was familiar with the political situation on Earth. Rhodan didn't see any sense in serving up a dishonest version of the circumstances, which would have collapsed like a house of cards anyway as soon as they entered Earth's orbit.

Malikk thought things over briefly before saying, "I understand. We Ferrons know of discord only too well. Our people once brought themselves to the brink of the abyss. If the first Thort had not turned up and ended that dark age, we would still live in caves today. If our people had even survived." Malikk looked intensely at Rhodan through eyes that were set deep below his bulging forehead. "The first Thort had had powerful allies. Ke-Lon. The network of transmitters. You, Rhodan, had nothing but your belief that you were doing the right thing."

"I did what was necessary." Rhodan turned his head away. The Ferron's stare—and his words—made him feel uncomfortable. "Anyone would have done the same."

"I doubt that."

This was followed by silence. Malikk seemed to sense Rhodan's discomfort. He pointed to a holo that showed the City of Terrania. "What's that tower in the middle of the city? It looks as if it's growing into the heavens."

"It just might do that." The tower had grown several floors in Rhodan's absence and would soon reach a hundred. And the building work continued. Several Arkonide robots were working at the tip of the tower, being helped by human workers. "It's the Stardust Tower, the center of Earth's new government."

"It's in the process of being created, isn't it?"

"Yes," Rhodan answered. "Can you see that large tent that has been set up at the edge of the city?" The Ferron nodded. "It will

host the first plenary assembly of the Terran Union. All nations on Earth have sent representatives to take part in it."

"Humanity is in the process of leaving its dark age behind it. You will be elected the Thort of the humans, Rhodan."

"Administrator," Rhodan corrected him. "If I even get elected."

Acting as if he hadn't heard Rhodan's last word, Malikk asked him, "What will you say to the humans, Thort?"

Rhodans pod buzzed. "Just a second, please, Ambassador Malikk." He took the call. It was Homer G. Adams.

"Welcome home!" the man with the photographic memory said. "I want to show you something you're going to like, Rhodan. Can you spare a moment of your precious time despite having just landed?"

Rhodan gave Malikk a questioning look. The Ferron indicated a slight bow. "It is not for me to keep you from your duties, Thort."

"Thort" again. Rhodan suppressed the impulse to correct the Ferron. "Okay. Where can I find you, Adams?"

"Leave the ship," came the response. "I'll send a driver to get you."

A steel sphere measuring eight hundred meters across stretched up into the air above Perry Rhodan—the *Tosoma*.

The Arkonide ship was carried by twelve telescopic supports that had extended from the lower half of the fuselage. Every one of them was larger than the *Stardust*, the ship that had taken Rhodan to the Moon. The *Stardust* plus its launch vehicle.

It was midday. The *Tosoma* cast a very dark shadow, but it was still hot beneath the ship. The heat came from the afterglow of the impulse drives and from the sixteen small lakes of melted stone it had burned into the soil. The rock would cool down and leave

behind perfectly smooth surface areas. The new rock lakes would get bigger with every landing, Pounder had explained, and before long, Terrania's spaceport would be "burned" into the ground.

A metal creaking noise made Rhodan whirl round. It was coming from the *Nesbitt-Breck*. The tractor beams had set the Topsidian ship down on the desert floor. Its length of 150 meters meant it was also very heavy, and its weight was now compressing the ground.

A large airlock opened above Rhodan, and a bright spotlight chased away the shadows. Other doors slid to the side as the unloading of the *Tosoma* got underway. Humans and Ferrons poured out of the ship, hovering down towards the desert floor on anti-grav fields. Tractor beams maneuvered Ferron vehicles and special machines out of the hangars and loading areas.

They were proof of the deep gratitude felt by the inhabitants of Vega. The invasion of the Topsidans had devastated the worlds of their home system. Mourning, hardship and scarcity dominated their everyday lives now. And yet they had insisted on providing their Terran rescuers with these gifts.

Rhodan was just leaving the shadow of the *Tosoma* when a Ferron gyrocopter was set down very close to where he was standing. A Topsidian energy beam had bored its way through the copter's rear, but it still seemed to be functioning.

Rhodan shaded his eyes from the glare of the midday sun and looked towards Terrania. The city was more than thirty kilometers away. The Stardust Tower looked like one of Earth's rockets getting ready for take-off. It was currently about half the height of the *Tosoma*, but it was still growing. The remaining buildings of the city were the foundations from which the tower stretched up towards the sky.

A strip of road connected Terrania with this remote part of the desert they optimistically called the "spaceport". A long row of vehicles were on their way over, looking like pearls on a chain, ready to unload the freight and passengers from the *Tosoma* and bring them to the city.

Where's my driver? Rhodan asked himself. Adams was extremely reliable.

As if replying to this silent question, a single cloud of dust rose up from the desert. An SUV cut out of the flow of vehicles, racing wildly along the terrain beside the road. Like most vehicles in Terrania, it had come from the inventory of the Chinese Army that had commanded the attack on the landing site of the *Stardust*. It drove directly towards Rhodan, rushing up before swinging round to stop abruptly at an angle of a hundred and eighty degrees in front of him.

A Chinese man of medium height was driving. "Welcome home, Mister Rhodan!" said Bai Jun, the general who had once led the attack on the *Stardust*. Only a few weeks had passed since then, but it felt like a very long time ago to Rhodan. "Get in!" The provisional Mayor of Terrania said with a smile. "Everything is as it should be. Mister Adams sent me."

Rhodan got into the passenger seat. He had barely closed the door when Bai Jun shot off.

"Was your mission successful?" Bai Jun asked.

"As you can see..." Rhodan showed him the Topsidian ship, which was behind them along with the *Tosoma*.

"I'm happy to hear it. We urgently need more spaceships that can fly to other systems."

"We now have our second ship with a translight drive. With any luck, we'll be able to retrieve more in the Vega System."

Bai Jun tore the steering wheel to one side to avoid a rocky outhang protruding into the road. He drove the vehicle off the strip of tarmac and continued alongside it, keeping his distance from it.

"Is it okay if I inform you of the status quo, Mister Rhodan?"

"Please do!"

"The plenary assembly can take place tomorrow as planned. As

we anticipated, there is some animosity between the delegates of the different nations. But we have the situation under control thanks to Adams. He misses nothing, no matter how small. And he never forgets a thing."

How could he?, Rhodan thought to himself. *He has a photographic memory. He couldn't forget even if he wanted to.* But he didn't say that out loud. He wasn't sureBai Jun knew about this talent of Adams's. And if not, then it was the older man's personal decision whether to share that information with the ex-general or not.

"What's with the tent?"

"It'll be standing by this evening. In time for the meeting." Bai Jun turned his eyes away from the desert and looked at Rhodan. "I'm looking forward to your speech. What will you say?"

"Wait and see."

Bai Jun accepted Rhodan's cool response in silence. Terrania drew closer as he once again accelerated.

When the outskirts of the city were immediately before them, Rhodan said, "We'll be in Terrania in a minute, Bai Jun. Would you like to tell me why you've sacrificed nearly an hour of your valuable time just to pick me up?"

Bai Jun stiffened. "You are very astute, Mister Rhodan."

"I'm just able to add two and two, that's all. What's up?"

The driver hit the brakes and brought the car to a halt. "Two months ago, we were still bitter enemies. And now..." He nodded in the direction of Terrania. "This city has become our joint project. The project of all humanity. I have the unexpected honor of serving as the mayor. Terrania is a marvel. Every morning when I wake up, it has grown even more, and the people who have come to the desert from all over the world have made new breakthroughs. It's chaotic, but the chaos is an incubator for new ideas. However, it is vital that all efforts be channeled in a direction that makes Terrania manageable if the city, and indeed if all of humanity, is to survive."

“Which is why we called the plenary session of the Terran Union.”

“That’s right. The meeting will give us a constitution. And it will elect you as Administrator, Mister Rhodan.”

There was a certain undertone in Bai jun’s voice, but what did it mean? Disapproval? Rhodan stiffened. “You don’t support my election?”

“Quite the opposite. You, Rhodan, are the man who has opened the door to a new era for humanity. You *must* lead us. But not only for a few years, as outlined in our constitution. Five years is no time at all in view of the task ahead.”

“What are you trying to say?” Rhodan asked.

“You must lead humanity, Perry Rhodan. But not for five years. You must lead them for life!”

“What you are suggesting is a dictatorship.”

“No. It’s the voice of reason.” Bai Jun left the motor running. “We should get going. Adams is waiting. But I implore you, Rhodan, think about my words. You owe it to humanity!”

8.

Crest da Zoltral

Before the Azores

September 14, 2036

"What the hell is that?"

Crest required some effort to suppress a smile. Humans did not think much about hiding their feelings. On Arkon, people would have found their lack of sophistication objectionable. But Crest realized that he was beginning to appreciate this openness more and more every day. It certainly made dealing with one another much less complicated.

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you, Mister Aescunnar."

Cyr Aescunnar removed the wide-brimmed hat from his head and held it to his chest before entering the hall that Crest had discovered. *As if I'm stepping into a sacred building, a church,* Crest thought. He spent every free minute he had learning about human culture and history.

"How did you...find this?" Aescunnar asked softly.

"I obviously had the nose for it, as you humans say. In more ways than one." Crest proceeded to explain how he had discovered the tunnel with the help of the two mutants.

"Have you already taken a look around?" the man who called himself a historian but had never attended university asked.

"Naturally. This hall must be about fifty meters long and thirty meters wide. The ceiling is four meters high. It is a self-sufficient mini-station, has its own energy supply, and all the equipment needed to keep two people alive for an unlimited period of time. In a chamber that leads off from the main room there are two deep-sleep loungers like the ones we found in the dome."

“Were they used?” the sharp-minded Aescunnar asked.

“It certainly looks that way.”

“What do the specialists say?”

“They’ve not been here yet. A hunch told me that I needed another kind of specialist.”

Aescunnar blinked, looking a little confused, and then his face reddened. He wasn’t used to receiving compliments for his work. Due to his lack of a formal education and his crazy theories, which threatened the foundations of established research, he was mostly either laughed at or insulted. If Homer G. Adams had not been financially supporting him for years, the self-proclaimed historian would have had to give up his research long ago.

“This basin here,” Aescunnar said, pointing to an area of water at the opposite end of the hall as he put his hat back on. “Is it connected to the sea?”

“Probably. Mr. Sengu used his spying powers and found a tunnel several meters in diameter that inclines downwards at a steep angle. His powers are unfortunately not strong enough to see the entire length.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Aescunnar went over to the basin. The surface was smooth, the water clear but black. Whatever was at the bottom was not visible. The blackness reminded Crest of the transmitter in the dome. A gateway into the unknown.

Aescunnar walked around the basin. His gait seemed a little forced, and he was forming words silently with his mouth.

“Big enough for a submarine,” he then said as he returned to Crest’s side. “What do you think?”

“Certainly. You know that we Arkonides are magicians when it comes to technology.”

“The thought had also already crossed my mind.” Aescunnar delivered his mild joke with a smile. “And you Arkonides are also

clever, I must admit. A station nearly three thousand meters on the floor of the Atlantic! And right next to it, *below* the ocean floor, a second station as the ultimate refuge! Who would think of such a thing?"

"That, Mister Aescunnar, is a question I am deeply interested in answering."

The historian turned away from the basin and gazed around the main room of the hidden station. "Do you know what this reminds me of?"

"Do tell me."

"The pyramids from the old kingdom of Egypt. They were the tombs of the pharaohs, who were buried with a huge number of their possessions, which they were supposed to take with them for their life after death."

"This made some of those who were still alive covetous of their riches, I assume?"

"Yes. You couldn't miss the pyramids. Grave robbers tried for centuries to get ahold of the treasures of the dead pharaohs. But the builders were clever. They safeguarded what they had constructed by laying traps. And they mostly did not hide the real treasure—the burial chamber of the pharaoh—at the center of the pyramid, but in areas one would not necessarily have suspected."

"Like this self-sufficient station here."

"Exactly. One might even think that its builders had learned from the ancient Egyptians." Aescunnar shook his head vehemently as if trying to free himself from this absurd thought. "But that is madness, of course. The dome is ten thousand years old. This station here can only be slightly older than that. Do you know what the world looked like ten thousand years ago?"

"No. What?" Crest had read about it, but he wanted to hear the information from the mouth of this so-called historian.

"That period is known as the New Stone Age. There were about

ten thousand humans on the entire planet then, maybe even half that. A crafty but miserable bunch that spread out northwards when the Ice Age came to an end. Humans were hunters and gatherers. Nomads. They didn't know anything about either metalwork or farming." Aescunnar held his breath for a second. "And now this!" He lifted both arms as if he wanted to embrace the hall. "Fantastical technology on Earth at exactly the same time!"

"*Arkonide* high tech."

"That's true. But that's not the point. The point is that, until only a few weeks ago, nobody on this planet—including me, and that's saying something—had considered something like this to be remotely possible. And now? What we see here before our eyes is fact. And the facts this reveals shake everything we humans thought we were certain of to the very core." Aescunnar turned to Crest. His eyes were glistening. "Crest, you are a scholar among your people. You know that history represents a construct of the living. With a little luck and a great deal of effort, this construct will also represent reality. But this complex topples the entire construct of human history!"

Crest studied the person that most contemporaries thought a madman. Then he said appreciatively, "On Arkon you would not have lasted very long before being eliminated, Mr. Aescunnar. There is little appreciation on my home planet for minds that allow themselves to be impressed by facts. Not anymore."

And someone who does not allow themselves to be impressed by facts, he added to himself, *is damned to fail in the face of reality.*

"Come on, Mr. Aescunnar, I'll show you the workshop."

"The workshop? What..."

"I gave the room that name, but see for yourself!" He led the historian to a gap in the rock face. A door slid to the side, allowing them to look into the room. It was filled with machines and tools. And artifacts.

"This... This is unbelievable!" Aescunnar's Adam's apple bobbed

up and down as he swallowed several times in a row. He walked up to a table, which was covered in artifacts from throughout human history. He reverently picked up an irregular clay disk. It was covered in grooves arranged in patterns of lines. “A cuneiform tablet! It must originate from Mesopotamia! I can hardly wait to decipher it!”

The historian stroked the grooves in the clay with his fingertips, a dreamy expression on his face. Then he laid the tablet down again and went over to the next item. It was a round shield, made of wood and with a treated animal skin stretched across it. He studied it from all angles.

“Do you know what it is?” Crest asked.

“Only approximately. I believe it might originate from the Mongolian horse-based culture. They established the biggest empire the world has ever seen.” The historian put the shield carefully back in place. “Using primitive means like these.” He picked up the next object. It was a plate whose shape was reminiscent of a leaf from a tree, painted with colorful patterns. “Tang Dynasty,” he whispered.

“Excuse me?” Crest asked.

“The perhaps most prosperous epoch in Chinese history. Chang’an, the capital city of the Tang, had more than a million inhabitants in the seventh century. It was the biggest city in the world.” Aescunnar put the plate gently back on the table, as if afraid he might damage it. “These pieces here come from different epochs. There can be only one explanation for that.”

“Yes? Please tell me what it is!” Crest’s pulse was hammering. The Arkonide had long since answered this question for himself. What he wanted from Aescunnar was confirmation.

“This station has two cryogenic loungers, you say. And they were used. So it seems logical the two Arkonides awoke from their deep sleep at regular intervals and went to the surface in submarines!”

“I agree with your conclusions,” Crest said. “But if that is the case, where are they now?”

“I can think of only two explanations for that. Either they are dead or they are on the surface of the planet as we speak.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Neither our once present or hypothetical Arkonides are here, nor is the hypothetical submarine.” Aescunnar pulled a handkerchief out of his pants pocket, removed his hat, and wiped the sweat that had formed on his bald head. “But if you ask me, I think they’re more likely dead.”

“Why?”

“Two reasons. First, these Arkonides must be old—very old. These artifacts prove that they often went to the surface. Despite the cryogenic sleeping facilities, they must have slowly aged.”

“That makes sense,” Crest admitted with a very slight hesitation, which he hoped went unnoticed by Aescunnar. The historian could not know that at least one Arkonide who had spent time at the station might have been immortal. “And the second reason?”

“Logic. These Arkonides were stranded on a primitive world without a way of returning home. Their only hope therefore was that one day Arkonides or people from another planet who had a command of translight space travel would come to Earth. That hope came true upon your arrival, Crest. If these Arkonides are still alive, then why haven’t they shown themselves yet?”

The human’s logic was without fault. And shocking. Crest was short of breath and suddenly dizzy. Why had these Arkonides—if they were still alive—forgone rescue? Why had Quiniu Soptor, the only surviving member of the *Aetron’s* crew, gone into the dome’s transmitter with the mysterious robot, Rico, instead of joining him and Thora? Had she discovered something that was more important than rejoining her fellow Arkonides? Had Soptor perhaps found the trail to immortality? And why had the two—still hypothetical—Arkonides not gone through the transmitter? Had they known what was waiting on them on the other side? Or was it possible that they did not know of the transmitter’s existence?

Crest felt faint. He took a step back, and leaned against the table for support. But it was too late. His knees buckled. He tried to hold on to the tabletop, but his outstretched arms swept past without finding anything to stop him from falling. The elderly Arkonide toppled to the floor in a shower of artifacts.

“Crest!” Aescunnar was right behind him in a second. “Have you hurt yourself?” The historian grabbed him below the arms and straightened his upper body.

“I don’t believe so.” A pulsating pain emanated from Crest’s left elbow. He laid his right hand there and felt to see what was hurting. “Only a bruise. Nothing serious.”

“I’ll help you!” Aescunnar said, not waiting for Crest’s reply. He pulled him up. “Support yourself here!” He placed the Arkonide’s hands on the tabletop. Crest gratefully accepted the help.

The historian kneeled down and began picking up the objects that had crashed to the floor. Crest forced himself to breathe slowly. He tried to ignore the maelstrom of thoughts spinning through his head and concentrated on looking at the tabletop. No dust, he noticed. How was that possible?

His eyes began to wander until they found a scroll. It was made of a thick brown material, which must have predated Earthly paper. The scroll had rolled out about ten centimeters. Letters were visible. Letters that...

Crest almost gasped but was able to suppress the impulse right away. Looking sideways, he made sure that Cyr Aescunnar was still busy collecting the fallen artifacts. Then he grabbed the scroll and slipped it hastily into his jacket.

Crest stood up straight, realizing that he was able to stand on his own two legs again despite his shaking knees. “Mister Aescunnar,” he said extra casually. “I think I will withdraw for a while and rest. This exciting discovery... You know, I’m no longer the youngest.”

Before the other man could even answer, he hurried into the tunnel that led to the dome, the treasure he had found pressed

against his throbbing heart.

An ancient Earth scroll. With Arkonide writing on it.

11.

Perry Rhodan

Terrania

Two hours after Adams was gone, Perry Rhodan had had enough of the view out of the fiftieth floor of the Stardust Tower.

His head was thumping, and he felt drained. What's more, he still hadn't found an answer to the question about what he should say to the people of Earth in his speech at the plenary session.

But at least he had learned one thing—he wouldn't find his answers this way.

He went into the bathroom, filled the unused glass with water, and drank. The water was cool and, unlike what he had drunk ten days ago, no longer had a salty aftertaste. Terrania was making progress, even in the more important areas like the water supply.

Rhodan washed his face with the cool water and then decided to go outside to get some fresh air. He didn't get far. Two men were standing at the threshold of the door separating his office from the Stardust Tower's anti-grav shaft. They whirled around when Rhodan opened the door. They were wearing conservatively tailored suits that didn't really fit their massive statures. Rhodan thought they looked like wrestlers.

The two men, one of them blond and the other dark-haired, just stood there. He could not help but get the impression that they were fighting the impulse to salute him.

The blond said loudly, "Good day, Administrator!"

Rhodan remained standing in the door frame. "Who are you?"

"Agent Willicot, Administrator," the man answered. He nodded towards his dark-haired companion. "And may I introduce Agent Jennings?"

“What are you doing outside my door?”

“Protecting you, Administrator!”

“I beg your pardon?” Rhodan suppressed a laugh of disbelief. “What gave you the idea that I might need protecting?”

“With your permission, Administrator,” Willicot answered. “There are some bad people out there, and you are vital to humanity. It is an honor for Jennings and I to...”

“Whose idea was this?” Rhodan interrupted. “Bai Jun?”

“No.” Willicot smiled. “Allan D. Mercant sent us.”

The veteran from US Homeland Security. Mercant had turned his back on the world of the secret service when he learned of the *Stardust’s* mission to the Moon and had switched over to Rhodan’s side. Mercant had decades of experience, a fine nose for danger, and always seemed to know what was coming. His accuracy in such matters was almost spooky. If that man did something, it was for good reason.

And yet...Rhodan eyed up the broad-shouldered duo standing before him trying to hide their excitement. Was *that* going to be his life from now on?

“Are you my bodyguards?” he asked.

“Yes. We will not move from your side! You can depend on us, Administrator.”

“I have no doubt whatsoever in that respect.” Rhodan took a step forward. The door closed behind him automatically. “Agent Willicot, please tell Mister Mercant that I am very grateful for his well-intended wish to look after me, but I do not need any protection. Good day to you gentlemen!”

He wanted to proceed towards the anti-grav shaft, but the two sturdy agents made no moves to let him pass.

“Please, Administrator.” Willicot’s expression was almost

beseeching. “We have our orders. We could never forgive ourselves if anything happened to you.”

Rhodan considered his options. The agents would not let him dismiss them. Should he call Mercant? He realized that was a bad idea. Mercant would not change his mind. He was extremely stubborn, which was why he had been unable to make a career at Homeland Security. It was what made him one of Rhodan’s most valuable associates.

“Okay,” Rhodan said. “You can accompany me. But only under one condition.”

“Of course, Administrator.” Willicot’s relief was tangible. “Name your terms.”

“Stop calling me Administrator. Otherwise I’ll make sure that after my election, you get reassigned to guard the robot station on Pluto, which is to go into operation very soon. Understood?”

Willicot swallowed audibly. “Understood, Adm— I mean, sir!”

“I’m happy we see eye to eye on that. Come, we’re going for a walk!”

Rhodan walked deliberately towards the city outskirts, the district of Terrania that had been created by humans rather than robots and was growing fast.

It was hot out there. The few buildings already completed were too far apart to offer any protection from the midday sun. And it was loud. There were construction sites everywhere, filled with the noise of machines. Provisional tent cities had been installed between the construction sites, and they could hear the babble of voices from their inhabitants despite the unbearable heat. A little farther away, a huge tent had been set up, and it was there that the plenary session was going to take place in only a few hours.

Nobody recognized Rhodan despite the fact that there were numerous photos and videos of him on the net. It was almost

certain that every single adult on the planet had seen his face at least once. And yet people greeted him like they would anyone else. He couldn't be a hundred percent sure, but his hunch was that the people could not equate the image they had of him with Rhodan the real person. The Rhodan on the net was larger than life, while the Rhodan walking across the dusty ground of Terrania was only one human being among many.

The situation was very different for his bodyguards. They followed him everywhere, never more than two steps behind him, clearly in awe of him. Rhodan was sure that Willicot and Jennings were trying to be discreet. They were obviously doing everything they could to make him forget their presence. But it just wasn't working. And there was no way Rhodan could do any serious thinking under these circumstances.

Rhodan stopped before a construction pit. "Willicot?"

"Sir?" The agent came up to his side. His face was red, and there were beads of sweat on his skin. He was obviously not used to the heat.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

Willicot could not hide his surprise. "Of course, sir!" he replied.

"What brought you to Terrania?" Rhodan pointed at the steel sphere of the *Tosoma*. It was awe-inspiring to look at even from a distance of thirty kilometers. "A desire for adventure? A longing for the stars?"

"No, sir." Willicot lowered his head and looked to one side. "To be honest, I always thought space travel was madness. Expensive, but harmless. And people like you, sir... People like you were madmen in my opinion. You..."

"Go on!" Rhodan said. "You're not the first person to call me that." He smiled encouragingly. "I assume that you have changed your opinion—at least a little."

"Yes, sir. That is...when you landed in the Gobi with the *Stardust*,

I thought you were not only mad but dangerous. I trusted President Drummond. I believed the Arkonide technology should belong to the USA. Then…" The agent kicked a small stone, sending it in a high arc into the pit. Willicot watched it go and remained silent until it had landed. He resumed speaking. "But then the Fantan arrived. My family were among the first settlers in Vermont. My great-great-great-great-grandfather created the first arable land there. And he built a house for our family, where we lived—until the Fantan came."

"Besun?" Rhodan asked. The term came from the Fantan language, and its full meaning was untranslatable. Besun could be everything or nothing for the Fantan. And they let nothing stand in their way of taking what they discovered and considered to be besun.

"Besun," the blond bodyguard confirmed. "There was something about our house that they liked. My father tried to chase them off. But he didn't have a chance in hell. The Fantan flew away, taking our house with them, and my father was left lying there, dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Willicot."

"Thank you, sir! After my father died, I was furious. I wanted revenge against these murderers. But once I found out more about the Fantan—aiming to learn where their weak spot was—I realized that it wasn't murder. The Fantan were thinking about nothing but besun, and my father was simply in the way."

The agent lifted his head and looked at Rhodan an. "And then I realized that we, the human race, could suffer the same fate as my father. We could find ourselves standing in the way of someone, and we would be doomed if we were unable to assert our rights. That is why I changed sides, sir."

The two men said nothing. Finally Rhodan spoke. "Thank you for being so honest, Willicot." Rhodan turned on his heel and looked towards the inner city. They were less than a hundred meters from the outer row of houses. What he was about to do felt hard. But he had to. He had to get some clarity. And the only way to achieve that was to be alone.

Rhodan turned his back on Terrania. Then he shouted out, “Oh no, look over there!” He pointed to the sky, directly at the sun.

“What is it, sir?” Willicot asked. He had squeezed his eyes half-closed.

“Don’t you see it?” Rhodan asked him. “There!” He gestured for Jennings to come over. The second bodyguard hurried towards them, his head tilted back.

Rhodan stuck his leg out in front of Jennings, who then toppled and landed on Willicot. The two bodyguards crashed to the ground.

“Don’t worry about me!” Rhodan called out to them as he sprinted off. He reached the inner city in a few seconds, disappearing into the shadows of its narrow, crooked alleyways.

He ignored the shouts of his two bodyguards, who soon fell far behind him. Rhodan slowed down to walking pace now that he was in familiar territory. He stopped in front of a building. Someone had written two letters on the wall: E. E.

He placed his hand on the letters and a passageway opened silently in the wall. Without hesitating, he entered.

A steep stairway led down into a windowless basement with very dull lighting. There was a bed in the middle of the room, the kind used in clinics. At the head of the bed was a battery of medical devices. Their displays showed a series of unchanging measurements.

A man was lying on the bed. He was pale, perhaps in his mid-thirties. His chin was covered in dark stubble, hollow cheeks above that. His eyes were closed.

Rhodan walked up to the bed. “Hello, Ernst Ellert!”

Ellert did not answer.

“Can I keep you company for a while?”

Rhodan took the silence as a yes, pulled up a stool on wheels,

and sat down on it. “Maybe you can help me? I... Well, I don’t know what to sa I had an experience recently. On Gol, the fourteenth planet in Vega. Actually, not on Gol, but in outer space. I saw a planet that...” He could hear steps.

Rhodan stopped talking. A girl came rushing down the stairs. It was Sue Mirafiore. She stopped when she got to the bottom. “Am I interrupting?”

Rhodan was about to answer with a gruff “Yes” but suddenly realized that that wasn’t the case. He would not get any answers from the man lying before him. “No,” he said loudly. “Not at all.”

Sue went to the bed, took a second stool, and sat down on it. She used her left arm to do it. Deliberately, Rhodan was certain. Until only a few weeks ago, her left arm had been nothing more than a stump. Then it had miraculously grown back. Or, using the terminology of the doctor named Fulkar, it had grown thanks to the “rare but fortunate combination of the patient’s para powers, the clinical work I performed, and an extraordinary, short-term general unleashing of para powers.” Fulkar, who spent nearly his entire time in Lakeside, had also invented a term to describe Sue’s para powers: “Metabio grouping.”

Rhodan didn’t doubt Fulkar. The doctor had medical knowledge that went far beyond that of Earth. However, for Rhodan, Sue was one thing more than any other—a girl with unusual courage who had finally used her unusual gift to help herself. And she was willing and able to use this even more in the service of humanity.

“Are you often here, Perry?”

It felt good not to be called “Administrator” or “sir” or some other title.

“As often as I can.” He grinned. “Which is not very often. What about you?”

“Every day for the past few weeks. Reg told me Ernst was lying here. And that he has been feeling lonely since his old comrades no longer have much time to visit him.”

“Comrades?”

“Walt and KaHe. I’ve never met them. They apparently recruit on the *Tosoma*.”

“I’ve never heard their names,” Rhodan said. He made a mental note to look for the two of them on the *Tosoma* as soon as he had a minute.

“It’s not so bad; Ernst has me now.” She winked at him. “I think Reg had his reasons for telling me about Ernst. He hopes that I can help him with my powers.”

“And can you?”

“Well, Mister Rhodan, the patient looks like he’s dead, but he’s in a stable condition,” she said, putting on a serious voice. Then she laughed. “No idea. But, to be honest, I’m not sure whether Ernst Ellert would be happy to wake up here. He seems to be experiencing the wildest adventures out there in the universe.”

“You could describe it like that.”

“Ras told me you encountered Ellert in the Vega system. Is that true?”

“Yes. On Lannol, one of the moons. Ellert was waiting for me there.”

“Without leaving this bed, as the log files in the surveillance cameras show. How can that be?”

“I wish I knew. Touching an Arkonide energy shield is lethal. Ellert should have been nothing but a pile of ashes afterwards. Instead, he fell into…this state. And his mind separated from his body and is now traveling through space *and* time.”

The pair fell silent, both of them lost in thought. Then Sue whispered, “Do you know what? You sound as if you’re envious of Ernst.”

Rhodan’s head snapped around towards her. He looked at the

girl in surprise—her maturity did not match her childlike body. “No, not at all! I would...” Rhodan stopped talking, realizing she Sue was right. He envied Ernst Ellert. Not that he had come into contact with an Arkonide energy shield. Or that his mind could obviously travel to places and eras in time that other humans couldn’t. He envied for him something far more basic—Ernst Ellert was free.

Ellert was not addressed in an awestruck tone as “Administrator” before even being elected to office. He was not anybody’s “bringer of the light”, the Thort of the humans, and nobody saw him as the savior of humanity—the man who took humanity to the stars. He was not a living legend that people were scared to approach.

“Do you know, Sue,” Rhodan said, turning to the girl. “It sometimes feels as if every single person on Earth is waiting for me to perform a miracle.” He looked at the clock. “In three hours, the Terran Union will elect its Administrator. People are expecting me to give a speech. And I... I still don’t know what I should say. How can I fulfill the aspirations of millions of people?”

It was a rhetorical question, something with no solution. Rhodan did not expect an answer to it, especially not from a fifteen year old.

But Sue had an answer. “Then don’t do it!” she said.

Rhodan jolted. “You mean not give a speech? That’s impossible!”

Sue shook her head. “No, you have to give your speech. You owe that to people. But I think you owe yourself something as well. You have to do what you want to do! Give the speech that you want to hear, not the one you think billions of others want. It’s that simple!”

Simple! Sue’s words echoed in Rhodan’s mind. And then he realized he could never do everything right for billions of people. But he could do the right thing for one person. Someone he would have to spend the rest of his life with. Himself.

“Sue, you’re not here by chance, are you?”

She blushed. “Well, perhaps not completely.”

“Mercant sent you, didn’t he?”

“No. Homer did.”

“Homer G. Adams?”

“Yes. Homer’s worried about you. He noticed you were ‘not quite yourself’ when he showed you your new office. He asked John for help. John used his telepathic powers, and then he asked me to check how you were doing.”

“You… You’re all unbelievable!” Rhodan couldn’t find the right words. He thought he had been all alone with his worries and thoughts, and all the time his companions had not let him out of their sight for a second. “Sue, you—”

Rhodan’s pod buzzed. He looked down at it. It was Eric Manoli. The former board physician on the *Stardust* was a calm, conscientious man. A man who would never bother a friend unnecessarily.

“Just a second, Sue,” Rhodan said as he took the call. “Eric, what’s up?”

“Perry, I’ve got some bad news.” It was an audio connection, but Rhodan could imagine the expression on his friend’s face. Manoli had a habit of frowning when things got serious.

“Tell me about it!”

“It’s about Crest.”

Rhodan was silent as Manoli explained. The doctor finally finished what he had to say. Rhodan thanked him calmly and hung up.

“Perry, you’re totally pale! What is it?” Sue looked at him, her eyes wide open. “Bad news?”

Rhodan nodded. “But it’ll have to wait until later. I have to hold

my speech first.” He took the girl’s hand and squeezed it. “Thank you, Sue. You’ve really helped me.”

He stood up and made a slight bow towards the bed. “We’ll meet again, Ernst Ellert!”

Then Perry Rhodan left.

12.

Crest da Zoltral

The Azores

A submarine was waiting for Crest.

He didn't recognize the type it was. He thought it was remotely related to the barracuda-type submarine, the one they had used for their initial push to the dome. Yet this must have been a later civilian version. The nose of the vessel tapered to a snout, onto which a fish's mouth had been painted—a comic-like, smiling one.

Crest thought about the conversation he had involuntarily had with Trker-Hon. The Topsidan was right. Humans were on the verge of completing, in no time at all, a development that normally took centuries or even millennia. The submarine in front of him in the miniature port basin of the underwater dome was a mixture of Terran, Ferron, and Akonide technology. The consequences of this —as always on Earth—were unpredictable.

The two female submarine pilots were waiting for him on the quay. From their features, he could tell they were Chinese, probably former members of Bai Jun's siege battalion. People who, two months ago, would have given everything to capture the strangers threatening their world, or at least kill them.

Now they welcomed him with deference. The two women bowed, their eyes sparkling with a yearning for adventure. Their old world had been irrevocably lost. Yet the new one more than made up for it.

The smaller of the two led Crest into the passenger cabin, made sure he was belted in, and then retreated discreetly.

Crest was left alone. Alone with the scroll, which pressed against his chest, and with his thoughts. There was no way the Arkonide was going to make the error of pulling out the scroll. Despite their

genuine respect, he was sure the two pilots were monitoring him on the cameras. He was Crest da Zoltral, the wise Arkonide. His welfare was much too important for them to lose sight of him.

He closed his eyes. In his thoughts, he repeated the sentences he had read. Unlike Homer G. Adams, Crest did not have a photographic memory, but he had learned mnemonic techniques early in life, which had since become second nature to him.

"The thought of aging by my side must have been unbearable for him."

Did that mean the commander—who else could have written this report?—had attained immortality? Or was he, in his longing, seeing "ghosts," as humans called them?

Yet assuming his assumptions were accurate, and that the commander had written this report, that he was immortal... Why had his companion, Cunor, not attained immortality too? And where was the commander now? He must have still been alive. Or had he got fed up with the loneliness and suffering and ended his immortal life? Or had he, the immortal, been murdered too?

The submarine engines started up. Crest heard the ropes tying it to the quay scrape over the hull. Then the humming dropped off again. The large screen filling an entire wall of the passenger cabin came to life and the face of the Chinese pilot appeared. She bowed, saying, "Please excuse the delay. We will be departing a few minutes late. Another passenger has arrived."

The screen went blank. A hard knock shook the hull, as if a heavy body had jumped on board. Trker-Hon? He couldn't rule out the Topsidan. Tactfulness was a foreign concept to the Wise One despite all his talk of what Arkonides and Topsidans had in common.

The door of the cabin opened and a woman entered. She was slim, with small eyes, and she had a sweet face by human standards. She was young, in her mid- to late-twenties at most.

"Miss Michalovna?" Crest said, forgetting in his confusion the

politeness he valued so much. “What are you doing here?”

The woman paused. “Do you mind if I join the journey?” she asked uncertainly.

“Not at all; be my guest,” Crest reassured her quickly. His intensity betrayed him. “I’m just a bit surprised.”

Tatiana Michalovna entered the cabin. “No worries, I have not read your thoughts. Doctor Manoli asked me to come to São Miguel.”

“What? Me too!”

The woman sat down in the chair next to him. The engines started up a second time. Passing through the airlock, the submarine entered the open sea. The speed of the engines increased and, as the pilots steered the vessel into a steep ascent, the passengers were pushed back into the backrests of their seats.

Images from the rear cameras appeared on the screen. Crest and Michalovna watched in silence as they left the dome behind them. Spotlights lit up the site, giving it the appearance of a sacred building. A feeling of reverence stirred within Crest. The deep sea was a habitat that was, in many respects, more hostile for Arkonides than the vacuum of space. His forefathers had created a miracle of technology with this dome. And, it was safe to say, done so under the most adverse of conditions.

As the dome shrank to a luminous spot in the pitch black of the deep sea, Crest was overcome with sadness. The dome was a miracle of engineering. And it was tens of thousands of years old. Since then, its culture had not developed any further in any meaningful way. In many respects, it had even gone backwards.

“Did Manoli tell you what happened?” Michalovna asked. She could sense his sadness, maybe because she was unconsciously using her telepathic gift, maybe simply because over the years, she had acquired an extraordinary ability for empathy.

“Unfortunately, no.” Crest replied. “But he appeared unusually

troubled as far as I could tell."

"I agree," the telepath confirmed. After an almost indiscernible pause, she continued. "Maybe there will be unexpected problems at the meeting in Terrania?"

"Possibly." Crest had decided to stay away from that meeting. Its purpose was to discuss the Terran Union and the election of its first Administrator. Such matters were for humans. And what was more, the discovery of the second hidden station had preoccupied him so much that he wouldn't have had any time or attention left for it. "But even if that were so," he continued, "what could the two of us have told them?"

Michalovna was telepathic, a reader of thoughts, a gift that caused uneasiness in others. In addition, she had worked for the criminal Clifford Monterny. Both these facts meant she was often treated with suspicion. Crest was no exception there, in particular after Michalovna had revealed to him that she had learned in his thoughts of his search for the Planet of Eternal Life.

Yet Michalowna had proven to be reliable over the past few weeks. She had kept his secret, and Crest had learned to value her. There was something comforting about having at least one confidante among human beings, even if it was a subject they usually avoided.

"Did you get any further information about this hidden station?" she asked.

"Not yet. But I have consulted Cyr Aescunnar about it."

"The wannabe historian everybody thinks is mad?"

"That very same. In times of madness, a madman is just what we need."

The submarine reached the surface. Crest jolted forward as the nose of the submarine splashed above the water, but the belts restrained him securely in his seat. A few minutes later, they moored in Ponta Delgado, the capital of the Island of São Miguel.

Via a rocking gangway, Crest and Michalovna climbed onto the quayside.

It was a sunny morning. Crest enjoyed the aromatic sea air, and the warm sun tickled his skin. Everywhere in the port, people were working. Until recently, the city and the island had primarily lived off tourism. Now, the port had virtually been taken over by the rotating crew working in biweekly shifts and the corresponding logistics for the underwater dome. With one or two exceptions, as the rattle of diesel announced the arrival of a fishing boat. It was returning from its nightly excursion as if the world were not turned on its head.

Eric Manoli was waiting on the quayside. “Crest!” He took the hand of the Arkonide, squeezing it firmly. “Thank you for coming so quickly!”

“Of course. I’m happy to oblige. Where—”

Manoli waved him aside. “Just a moment.” It was an impolite gesture for a man who always placed such importance on politeness and stressed the urgency of his request.

Manoli led them to a car, opened the passenger door for Crest, and sat down in the driver’s seat. Touching the sensor panel on the steering column with his thumb, the doctor began to drive.

“Stop,” Crest called out. “We’ve forgotten Miss Michalovna!”

“She’s not coming with us,” Manoli replied.

“Why not? You requested her help, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. And she’s done her job.” The doctor accelerated without any further explanation.

They quickly left Ponta Delgada behind them. Manoli steered the car through a sparsely populated area along the coast. He drove calmly and carefully, which was typical of his character. Crest was happy about that. He found the idea of Arkonides or humans manually steering vehicles to be strange in spite of the two and a half months he had spent on Earth. Why was such a complex

coordination task like this, the failure of which might have resulted in fatal consequences, left to fallible organic beings when there were virtually infallible alternatives?

“Do you know the Azores?” Eric Manoli asked. The doctor flipped a switch and the window on the driver’s side lowered into the door frame. The headwind surged into the car. Aromatic sea air mixed with the smoke pluming from the chimneys of houses.

“Only the port of Ponta Delgada. The dome took my full attention.”

“Understandable but regrettable,” the doctor said, sticking his left arm out of the window and playing with the wind with his fingers. “São Miguel, the Azores is one of the most exotic regions on Earth. Very remote. They have been inhabited by human beings for barely six hundred years, and the climate is mild. It gets neither too hot nor too cold here.”

“Yet it rains constantly.”

Manoli laughed quietly. “Have you been learning about the islands?”

“Actually, no. But you learn some things by talking to the crew of the dome. The specialists complain about the rain on their non-working shifts.”

As they arrived at a junction, the doctor slowed down. “Lagoa da Fogo,” a sign said. Manoli steered the wheel to the left and followed the directions indicated on the sign.

“Human beings.” Manoli shook his head. It was a cutting remark but Crest interpreted it affectionately. “They’ll find a hair in the finest of soups.”

The street went upward now. The last houses of the coastal settlement lay behind them. They were met by an alternation of forests and meadows, and as a result they could see far into the distance. As the wind pushed clouds over the landscape, they were bathed in an interaction of light and shadows.

“Are there places like this on Arkon?” asked Manoli.

“No.” Crest thought for a moment. “I don’t know any anyway. We Arkonides conquered space a long time ago. The price we paid for that was the immaculateness of our home. But we have the stars as compensation. We find the immaculate there.”

“And they will never decline.”

They continued silently. The final traces of human activity were behind them. Only the barrier at the side of the road testified to the presence of human beings. Wisps of fog hung over the hills, lending the landscape a mystical appearance.

Six hundred years. By Arkonide standards, the island had only been settled a moment ago. And before that... Crest thought of the scroll pressed against his chest, of the possibly immortal commander. He had risen to the surface; the artifacts proved it. He must have been on this island too.

Crest imagined the commander roaming over the immaculate island. He thought again of the Greeks, of Hesiod, of the iron age. Hesiod’s era was a projection of his own wishes and fears, but at least in one respect, they were accurate. In times gone by, a man faced the universe all alone. Today he was entangled in an inseverable web of obligations and relationships, and the wilderness was a precisely confined protective area like it was here.

Manoli stopped at a parking area on a dirt surface at the side of the road, and Crest dismissed these heavy thoughts.

“Are we there?” he asked without knowing where “there” really was.

“In a moment. I just thought we shouldn’t miss the view.”

The doctor climbed out and went to the edge of the parking lot. A coarse fence made of tree trunks marked its perimeter. Crest followed him.

The air was different here. Damp, but instead of the salt, it had an undertone of resin now. Below the parking area, a lake stretched

out, half-hidden in the fog.

“The Lagoa da Fogo,” said Manoli. “The fire lake.”

“Strange choice for a name. Dense fog is what I can see for the most part.”

“You’re right. I think the name goes back to when the lake arose. It is located in a volcanic crater.” Manoli breathed in deeply as if to revitalize himself with the aromatic air. “Shall we drive on?”

“If you tell me where to, Doctor Manoli.”

“Of course.” He stretched out his arm and indicated a ridge with trees that pointed into the lake like a finger. “Do you see that rocky peak? The one glistening in the sun?”

“Yes.”

“That’s our destination.” Manoli looked at his watch. “Less than five minutes. The others will be waiting there.”

They returned to the car and continued their journey. A few hundred meters farther on was a country lane, which branched off. There were no signs. Manoli turned onto it without hesitating. He drove slowly, barely twenty kilometers per hour as Crest could see from the instrument panel. Despite this, the Arkonide clutched the door handle involuntarily with his right hand. He came from a civilization where there was no such thing as vehicles, as they would have led to tremors.

At the end of the path, a house jutted out of the forest. Crest, now familiar with human cultural categories, classified it as a “villa”.

“You said there was a nature conservation area here,” the Arkonide remarked.

“There is.”

“So how did this villa get here?”

“Corruption.” Manoli shrugged. He looked embarrassed, as if he were ashamed of how bad his race was. “A multi-billionaire bribed the right people. But now the property has a new owner. You know him. Homer G. Adams.”

“Adams?” Crest had gotten to know the older man as a man with scruples, and personally modest despite his wealth. “What does he want with it?”

Manoli stopped in front of the house. Two other cars were already parked on the shale driveway. “To tear it down and restore the conservation area to its immaculate state. But I thought, why shouldn’t we use it in the meantime before he does so?”

They went inside the house. The door was not locked. Why should it be? Manoli hung his coat up on a hook. Crest kept his on. There was too much of a risk that the doctor would notice the scroll.

“The others are on the terrace, I imagine. Come on, Crest!” said Manoli, gesturing by way of invitation.

The elderly Arkonide followed him. Confused, he noticed his pulse was racing. “Help.” The others. This remote house. What did it all mean? He detected the silhouettes of two people through a curtain. Allan Mercant? Bai Jun? They were Rhodan’s associates, who Crest described in his thoughts as “the doers”. Men who went about their task with a proper dose of realism and never gave in. Men such as Arkon had not produced for a long time now. Bai Jun and Mercant were always on hand when there was a crisis to be overcome.

Or maybe Adams himself? Crest put his thoughts aside. Adams was at a plenary session in Terrania, which was being held at this very moment. But what could be so important that Terrania’s leading men would come to this remote island?

Manoli pulled the curtain to one side. Crest recognized who was waiting for him. He felt a stitch in his chest, which caused him to gasp for air and bend down involuntarily. Manoli was at his side in a second, holding him steady.

“Crest! Everything okay?”

“Yes,” the old Arkonide lied. It was not those the people who were creating Terrania who were waiting for him, but the doctors.

13.

Perry Rhodan

Terrania

They had come to Terrania, 3,798 delegates. And they had come from all 211 states with the intention of declaring those states a thing of the past. They had come to herald in a new era. The Golden Age of humanity, the era of traveling to the stars.

Homer G. Adams stood at the speaker's lectern on the stage and greeted the delegates, then began the proceedings that had brought them in droves to the Gobi Desert, to elect the first Administrator of the Terran Union. The hunchbacked man was wearing his usual suit with its patches on the elbows and knees with a natural and relaxed air, as if he were just spending some time with a few close friends.

Perry Rhodan was standing next to Reginald Bull below the stage, waiting to be called up, gazing across the crowds gathered there. He saw young faces and old, the faces of men and women, faces of all skin colors, some unusually beautiful and some unusually plain faces. But more than anything else, he saw beaming faces full of expectation.

"Can you do me a favor?" Bull whispered to him. "Pinch me! This is not really happening, is it? It can't actually be happening, can it! We're obviously still on the Moon, our oxygen is running out, and our brains are starting to fantasize—that's what's really going on, isn't it?"

Rhodan laughed softly. "No. It's only a crazy dream that has come true. It's what people generally refer to as 'life'."

Bull was laughing now as well. Rhodan gazed across the crowds. He tilted his head back, protecting his eyes from the bright spotlights with his hand. He saw the stars.

The huge tent, where the meeting was supposed to be held, had

collapsed an hour before things were set to start. Adams had remained calm. The old man, who had just assured the delegates that the main pillar of the Terran Union was self-determination for the regions of the Earth, had arranged for the chaos of the canvas, wires and twisted metal to be cleared, and had simply carried on as scheduled as if nothing had happened.

A tent of another kind was now protecting the delegates from the chilly night air—an Arkonide energy shield. It was invisible, only recognizable to the trained eye as a weak shimmering in the form of an arc. This shimmering made the stars sparkle, and Rhodan thought that had to be a good omen.

It was the same energy shield that, not too long ago, had saved him, his colleagues from the *Stardust*, and the Arkonide Crest da Zoltral from the heavy barrage of the Chinese artillery. Ordered by a man who was now there in the stands only a few meters from Rhodan: Bai Jun. Former General of the People's Freedom Army, son of a Han-Chinese father and a Uigur mother. He was highly intelligent, ambitious, and unbending, and now he was on Rhodan's side. Respected, esteemed, and perhaps one day a friend, albeit a friend with his own sometimes bothersome way of seeing things.

Bai Jun realized that Rhodan was looking at him. He moved towards the latter, and remarked, "A great moment, Mister Rhodan, don't you think?"

"Yes. But one that is difficult to grasp."

"Yes, it certainly is. Have you made your decision?"

Rhodan did not waver under the intense gaze of the former general. "Yes, I have. Thank you for your input, Bai Jun. It was of great value."

"You flatter me. I only did what I believed to be my duty." The man gave a slight bow, nodded politely to Bull, and went to the place reserved for him in the first row.

"What were you two chatting about?" Bull hissed. His old distrust of Bai Jun had flared up again.

“Nothing for you to worry about.”

Bull snorted. “Don’t give me that. What were you and Bai Jun whispering about?”

“You’ll find out soon enough, trust me!”

“I do. I get involved in every crazy scheme you think up. Or have you forgotten that? But...”

“But what?”

“There’s something afoot.” Bull’s face was red with anger. “You’ve gone all quiet again, got that decisive look on your face. Like back then when Pounder shot us to the Moon on the *Stardust*, and we could only guess at the reasons why...and you thought more about it and in a more intelligent way than all of us put together. I was so scared I nearly wet my pants. And you? You were totally calm and collected,like you knew exactly what was coming and what to do about it!”

“I was just as scared as you were, Reg,” Rhodan answered. At the same time, he remembered that his friend was a hundred percent right with his second observation. Rhodan had indeed known what they had to do, just as he knew now, before the eyes of all humanity.

“Yeah, sure you were!” Bull hissed at him. “You—”

He fell silent as the delegates began clapping. Adams had ended his speech and asked Rhodan to step up to the speaker’s lectern.

“You are the best friend a person could wish for, Reg.” Rhodan patted his old friend on the shoulder, and then he turned towards the narrow stairway that led up to the stage.

He was accompanied by applause all the way to the lectern, where Adams greeted him with a firm handshake. Rhodan positioned himself behind the lectern, pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and smoothed it out. The sheet had been torn out of a pocket diary of Chinese origin. The paper was yellow and had a dragon drawn in red along its edges. There were a few

keywords written on it, which was all he needed.

Rhodan took the glass that had been put there for him and drank from it. The clapping slowly died down, making way for an expectant silence. Rhodan looked into the bright glare of the spotlights. He knew that behind the white wall they created, there were almost four thousand delegates, and cameras pointed in his direction were recording every word he said to transmit them to the remotest corners of the planet. Several billion people were waiting at this very moment to hear what he had to say.

Rhodan put down the water glass and said, “Terrans!”

He sensed their surprise, and then the silence was replaced by thunderous applause. When this ended, after a minute that felt to Rhodan like an eternity, he began to speak.

“Not even three months ago, the *Stardust* landed on the banks of the Juyan salt lake. This is undeniably one of the most hostile places on the face of our home planet—and in the wrong location. The Gobi belonged to the People’s Republic of China, the *Stardust* to the United States of America. The landing made us—Reginald Bull, Doctor Eric Manoli, Clark G. Flipper, and myself—traitors in our own country. The only question, it seemed, was who would get hold of us first. We didn’t know what was more likely: that we would die in a torture center of the Chinese secret service or be prosecuted as traitors in our own homeland.”

And one of us, Rhodan thought to himself, *did lose his life in the process.* Clark, of all people; a man completely disinterested in politics, who had sacrificed himself for Rhodan’s cause at a decisive moment.

“Our outlook was anything but positive,” Rhodan continued, “and yet we did not hesitate. We owed it to the human spirit *and* to humanity. On board the *Stardust*, we brought the Arkonide scholar Crest da Zoltral to Earth. Close to death and in need of our help. In need of our humanity. And at the same time, humanity also needed him. The Arkonides resemble us humans to an astonishing extent. At the same time, they are alien to us, and in many ways far superior.”

He pointed at the night sky, where position lights illuminated the enormous fuselage of the *Tosoma*.

"The spaceship, which the Arkonides had come to the Moon on, was a steely sphere with a diameter of five hundred meters. That ship, the *Aetron*, was capable of flying from star to star. It could cover distances that the human mind hasn't even begun to grasp. But humans can dream. And from the very beginning of our existence, we've dreamed of finding out what lies beyond the next hill, past the horizon. Dreamed about growing beyond our own limitations."

The *Aetron* had been destroyed. It and its crew had fallen victim to the humans' fear of aliens. But the *Tosoma* was a more than worthy replacement.

"Our encounter with the Arkonides made this dream a reality overnight. This encounter was a moment whose importance cannot be overestimated. It is the moment that will stay with me to the end of my life in every single detail." Rhodan picked up the glass again and took another sip. "But I can tell you that it pales in comparison to today. Never before have we humans been able to set aside our conflicts. Never before have we admitted that there is far more that connects us than divides us. That our neighbor, who may have different habits to us, or people with different beliefs, or who come from another nation are not our enemies, but our companions. We are all humans—Terrans. And that's what counts."

The crowd once again burst into thunderous applause. Rhodan waited until it had subsided, and then he continued. "The Fantan, who traveled all over our planet in search of booty, which they called besun, did not see us as Americans, Chinese, or Russians. They did not see us as either black or white, as rich or poor. They saw only humans!"

Rhodan screwed up his eyes, which were slowly becoming accustomed to the bright lights. He recognized Bull, who was nodding in approval at his words.

"For a long time, we humans believed we were the pinnacle of all creation. We believed ourselves to be unique. This belief had

been wavering for decades, and now it is finally obsolete. The universe is full of life. Arkonides, Fantan, Ferrons, and Topsidans are only a tiny selection of the spectrum. Our uniqueness is gone!"

There was some applause for this, but relatively reserved, and then it died down again. This part of Rhodan's message was not easy to swallow.

"There are people who are scared of this idea," Rhodan continued, talking more quietly now. "That's understandable, but I can assure you, it's not necessary. Consider what we have lost, and then compare it to what we have gained. The gateway to a better future has unexpectedly opened up for every single one of us. An exciting, infinitely varied future. All we need to make this future work for us is courage!"

Rhodan cleared his throat and became louder again. "I know that we have this courage! I've seen it. On the Moon, my faithful colleague and good friend, Reginald Bull, proved that to me when we first encountered the huge ship of the Arkonides. Eric Manoli and Clark Flipper proved it too. Clark even gave his life for the future of humanity. We are all indebted to him."

Bull was fidgeting nervously in his seat. He found it very hard to stay sitting down.

"We are indebted to a great many others as well," Rhodan said. "Bai Jun, for example, the general who was chosen by the Chinese government to destroy the *Stardust* and its crew. If he had not had the courage to defy the orders of his leaders, there would be no Terran union. Then there is Allan D. Mercant, who, after decades serving the Department of Homeland Security, followed his conscience and changed sides to join forces with a handful of renegades—astronauts who had obviously lost their minds. There are also the hundreds of thousands of people who gave up their old lives and found their way from all corners of the Earth to the *Stardust's* landing site. And there are the millions who stood up against their governments and, risking their well-being, even their lives, made sure that humans could become Terrans and that the Earth could become Terra. Every single one of you has contributed to this day happening!"

These words earned minutes of applause. Once it had died down, Rhodan spoke again. “We now face an election. The Terran Union needs an Administrator. And it is said that my chances of fulfilling that post are not bad.”

The response to this was good-natured laughter. Rhodan closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. The decisive moment was coming ever closer.

“I would like to thank you for the trust you have placed in me. The opportunities that lie before us are literally endless, but so are the challenges. The technology we have received from the Arkonides will change the world within only a few years—so much so that we will hardly recognize our own planet. Many habits we have come to love will fall by the wayside, along with numerous things, both big and small, that we held to be true until now, but which have ultimately proved to be groundless. It will be a painful process. But we will be able to bear that pain in view of what we will be gaining.”

“With the help of Arkonide knowledge, we will be able to heal most illnesses and infirmities that we humans are plagued by. We will live healthier and longer lives. We will age with dignity. Perhaps we will conquer old age itself. Poverty and injustice will be concepts we will have difficulty explaining to our children in only a few generations. We will prevent our world, the Earth, Terra, from global warming. Natural catastrophes will be a thing of the past. We humans will build our own spaceships, and they will be every bit as good as the Arkonide ones. And we will travel to the stars in them. We will set eyes on the light of distant suns. We will encounter beings whose strangeness will take our breath away. And every single encounter will bring us one step closer to the goal of understanding ourselves.”

He fell silent and let his words sink in. A voice whispered in his mind, *“Come, Perry Rhodan! I need you!”* For a few seconds, he was all alone in outer space again, hurtling towards the impossible half-planet. He could feel the heat as the city came closer and...

Rhodan shook off these powerful images and returned his mind to the tent in the desert that wasn’t a tent at all, to the thousands,

the billions of people waiting to hear what he was going to say next.

“This city of Terrania shows us in a small way what enormous tasks lie ahead. Terrania quite literally emerged out of nothing. Two months ago, this area of land was a barren desert. Now it is home to almost two million people. People from all countries, from hundreds of different cultures, who speak so many different languages. They need a roof over their heads, water to quench their thirst, food to sate their hunger. They need energy, administration, work to do. The citizens of Terrania have created all that themselves. They have demonstrated what humans are capable of when they put aside their prejudices and fears, and combine their abilities and talents.”

His throat was suddenly very dry. Rhodan drank from the glass.

“But that requires leadership, coordination, if Terrania is to continue to flourish, if the Earth is to become Terra and humans are to become Terrans. This leadership needs patience and sensitivity, conscientiousness, a dedication to detail, a good ear—properties that, to my mind, are not foreign to a former astronaut who asserted himself against the bureaucracy of NASA, and brought rockets into space that could have ended up in massive explosions by the slightest error.”

This time the delegates’ laughter was louder, freer.

“But Terra, humanity, are neither an encrusted bureaucracy nor a machine. The magnitude of the tasks ahead is hard for someone with a normal mind to cope with. Terra needs an Administrator with extraordinary capabilities.”

The laughter died away, replaced by a more somber mood. The delegates wanted to finally hear the decisive words from him. When was Rhodan going to announce his candidature?

“I know a man who has all the requisite capabilities to be the Administrator,” Rhodan said. “A man who never rests. A man who never forgets a thing. A man who can dedicate himself to every single detail, no matter how small, and give it the attention it

deserves. A man with experience. A man who never allows himself to become flustered. A man who knows people and still loves them. Who has friends and helpers all over the world, and he is a man who makes new friends fast."

Rhodan heard a scuffling noise. The sound of soles nervously scraping the ground.

"You know this man. He was standing here at the speaker's lectern just a few minutes ago. His name is Homer G. Adams!"

14.

Crest da Zoltral

The Azores

Crest da Zoltral pulled himself together and stepped out onto the terrace.

“Doctor Haggard, Fulkar,” he said, greeting the two men. “Please excuse my...my reaction. I wasn’t expecting to meet you here.”

Manoli went over to the table standing at the edge of the terrace, took a chair, and brought it to Crest. “Would you like to sit down?”

“No need. I think... I have a feeling that this won’t take very long, am I right?”

Manoli shook his head without saying a word. He put the chair down beside Crest and then went over to the other doctors.

“Gentlemen,” Crest said in a voice he hoped sounded calm and confident, “You have called me to you. How can I help you?”

The doctors looked at one another but still said nothing. It seemed as if they were unsure about who should speak first. Haggard put his drink down on the table. He looked like a man who suddenly felt uncomfortable in his own skin. The Australian was an athletic man, a passionate rugby player, and people often falsely thought him to be superficial at first. In reality, he was an idealist who had donated the prize money from his Nobel Prize to an Ethiopian clinic in the hope that they could gain control over the continuously emerging variants of HIV there.

Manoli finally cleared his throat. “Crest, you can help us to save your life.”

The words hit the elderly Arkonide hard, but not as hard as one would expect considering their implication. He stretched out his arms, took hold of the back of the chair, and steadied himself. He

swayed a little but did not fall. Crest was an intelligent man. He'd had an inkling of what was to come the minute he had walked onto the terrace.

"That requires some explanation, Doctor Manoli."

"Of course. We received the lab results of your biweekly check up this morning, Crest. They... They don't look good."

"Has my immune deficiency worsened again?"

Manoli shook his head. "No. It is a new illness. Cancer. A sarcoma is spreading throughout your body. It's extremely aggressive."

Crest looked at the man who had saved his life. The circumspect Eric Manoli, who weighed up every word with care before speaking. His gaze went beyond Crest, over the terrace, and towards the sea. Wisps of fog played across the surface of the water and on the hillsides. The elderly Arkonide thought the view to be one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen in his life—and Crest, who belonged to the Arkonide upper class—had seen many places and planets.

It seemed unreal, even slightly surreal. It wasn't happening. It *couldn't* be happening.

"Doctor Manoli, you know how much I respect you, and how much I am indebted to you and Doctor Haggard. But you must be mistaken! I feel much younger and stronger than before."

"That is unfortunately not unexpected," Manoli said, making nervous movements of his head as he spoke. The doctor had to force himself to maintain eye contact with Crest. "The metastases have not yet affected any vital organs. But that will soon change, as the cancer is already in your blood vessels. The diagnosis is clear. We've all checked it several times. I wish we had better news for you."

Crest's fingers gripped the back of the chair even more tightly as he held on to the wood with a strength that came from desperation,

as if he could somehow hold on to life itself. “Okay, then. When should we begin with the treatment? Perhaps you already know, gentlemen, that we have made an exciting discovery in the underwater dome. I want to spend as little time as possible on this other matter. I’m sure you can understand that.”

“If you want, we can start treatment today.” Manoli pressed his lips together so tightly that they formed a pale thin line. “But there’s one thing—you won’t be able to continue your work. The treatment is a combination of chemotherapy and genetic therapy as well as radiotherapy. It will be extremely painful, and the side effects shouldn’t be underestimated. You will need a great deal of courage and the ability to withstand quite a bit of pain, Crest. And...”

“And?”

“You must be clear about the fact that your chances of survival are very slim.”

“How slim?”

“Practically zero.” Manoli had to force the words out and only managed a hoarse whisper.

Practically zero. Crest felt nauseous. Zero. That was impossible. Was it not? The elderly Arkonide turned to the man next to Manoli. “Doctor Haggard, that can’t be true, can it? Tell me it’s not true! You saved my life once. You managed to achieve what dozens of Arkonide doctors and other specialists couldn’t.” His eyes wandering to look at Fulkar for a second. “Help me!”

“I will. You have my word.” Haggard had folded his hands and looked as if he was kneading an invisible substance between his fingers. “But medicine has its boundaries. This sarcoma is extraordinarily aggressive. There is some evidence that it is an aftereffect of your illness. Your immune system was so weakened that the cancer was able to spread.”

That was a no. Polite and well-founded, but still a no. Crest turned to his last source of hope, the medical expert from Aralon.

“May I ask you for your opinion, Fulkar?”

The doctor folded his arms. “I’m afraid I must give you the same diagnosis as my two colleagues, Crest. However, as far as the treatment goes, I am of a different opinion.”

“Oh, yes?” A slight feeling of hope suddenly formed in Crest. Fulkar was an aloof man, but under his tough outer shell, he was very empathic. Fulkar had shown that to be the case when he had given Sue a healthy arm. “What do you suggest?”

“I believe that the chances of success from the treatment proposed by Doctor Manoli and Doctor Haggard to be so slim, and the side effects to be so unpleasant, that I must reject them for ethical reasons. No intelligent being should have to face such suffering considering the state of our medical knowhow. I suggest a palliative treatment. I am certain that we can maintain a high quality of life for you in the weeks that you have left.”

“Weeks? I have no more than that?”

“Without treatment, no,” Manoli said. “Four, maximum six, weeks.” The doctor’s eyes glistened with tears. “I’m so sorry, Crest.”

“It’s okay.” Crest stiffened. “We all have to die some time, don’t we?” *But not yet!,* he thought at the same time. *Not now that I am so close to finding immortality!* “Gentlemen,” he said, in control again. “Thank you for your honesty. Perhaps you’ll understand that I need some time to think about what you’ve said.”

“Of course,” Manoli replied. “We have prepared a room for you. The house is at your disposal. You can remain undisturbed to think things over and come to a decision.”

The doctor led him to a wide staircase that led up to the first floor. Manoli supported him by placing a hand beneath his armpit. Crest allowed him to do so. He was deep in thought.

The room was flooded with light. The side facing the sea opened out onto a large balcony that was only a little smaller than the terrace. The wall was fully glazed, providing an unhindered view of

the outside. The humans meant well. They wanted to make his final days as pleasant as possible.

Manoli led him to the bed, and Crest dropped down onto the mattress. “I... I’m tired,” he said softly. “I think I’ll sleep a little.”

“An excellent idea,” Manoli said. “That’ll perhaps clear your mind.”

“No doubt. I’ll call if I need anything, okay?”

“Of course.” Manoli pointed towards a switch on the wall. “You only have to press that and we’ll be there.”

“Thank you!” Crest took Manoli’s hand and squeezed it tightly. “I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“I’m merely remaining true to the oath I took.” Manoli walked towards the door. “Get some sleep now, Crest!”

Crest lay down on the bed. He closed his eyes and listened to Manoli’s steps as he walked down the stairs. The Arkonide counted slowly to thirty before taking out his pod and choosing a number.

“Miss Michalovna? I need your help!”

Crest gave the telepathic woman his instructions. Then he switched the pod off and laid it on the night table. He stood up and went to the side window. The Arkonide had hoped to find a fire escape ladder there, but there was none. Using the drainpipe instead, he slithered down to the ground below. An unshakeable determination gave him unexpected strength and agility.

He snuck into the woods and ran into cover of the trees to the main road, a pathway providing him with orientation. He had only just reached the roadway when a white compact car arrived, coming from the direction of Ponta Delgada. It stopped at the beginning of the driveway up to the house.

As Crest walked to the car, the driver leaned over and pushed open the passenger door from inside.

“You ordered a taxi, sir?” Tatiana Michalovna asked. Her eyes were glistening.

Crest got in. “Yes.”

“And where are we headed?”

“To the Planet of Eternal Life.”

“As you wish!” Michalovna said, and drove off.

15.

Rhodan

Terrania

For a moment, there was silence.

“I am withdrawing my candidature,” he said, “and proposing Homer G. Adams as the first Administrator of the Terran Union!”

Four thousand people jumped from their seats. They were surprised, angry, and they felt cheated. Rhodan screwed up his eyes and looked at the first row. Bai Jun and Reginald Bull—like everyone else at the plenary session—had also been unable to stay seated. Bull noticed Perry looking at him and shook his head slowly, but with a wide grin on his face. Rhodan could imagine what his friend was thinking, *You old scoundrel! You’ve done it again!*

Bai Jun, who was standing right next to Bull, had clenched his fists. He was shaking with fury. The former general did not appreciate being left in the dark. But at the same time, he was used to reacting extremely fast when there was an unexpected turn of events. The Chinese leaders had chosen Bai Jun with great care. They had realized that the *Stardust* landing in the Gobi could have unforeseen consequences. They had chosen the unconventional man without realizing that Bai Jun himself would be an unforeseen consequence.

Bai Jun lifted his arms and spread his fingers several times. It was a tenacious gesture, as if he had to overcome an inner tension and the anger raging within him. He succeeded. Then he clapped. Slowly and loudly. He was the only one of the four thousand people present to do so. But not for long.

Reginald Bull also began to clap, and row after row, the delegates followed their example. The applause spread even farther until everybody was clapping, with one exception—Homer G. Adams.

Reginald Bull went to the old man with the hunched back, who couldn't believe what was happening, and clapped him on the shoulder. He indicated for Adams to move to the speaker's lectern.

When Adams stood up, Rhodan took a step back, removing himself from the beam of the spotlight. He went to the back of the stage, where a stairway led down. A woman was waiting for him at the bottom. She was tall and athletic. Her hair was long and white, her skin pale. She had full, red lips and red eyes with tears in them.

"Thora!" Rhodan called out. "What's wrong? Don't you agree with my decision?" The Arkonides were surprisingly like humans in many aspects. However, their tears did not indicate sadness, but anger or excitement.

"No. You had the chance to be chosen as the most powerful member of your species, to become the Regent of your people, and you turned it down." She gave a dismissive gesture of the hand. "On Arkon, they would subject you to an intense psychological examination."

"We're not on Arkon."

"I know. And you are neither Arkonide nor insane, Rhodan. I have learned that since we first met. You have made your decision, and you no doubt have your reasons."

"What's wrong? Don't you believe Adams is suited to the position of Administrator?"

"He is extraordinary. A good choice. Even if I believe that you would have been the better choice, Rhodan."

He wanted to thank her for the unexpected compliment, but she indicated with an imperious gesture that revealed her high standing among the Arkonides, that he should say nothing.

"It's not about you. It's Crest."

Of course, Crest! Why hadn't he guessed that right away? Crest was Thora's mentor. He meant more to her than her own pride, more than Arkon. There was nothing she would not have done for

him.

“Did Eric inform you about his condition?” he asked.

She nodded. A gesture that showed the humans had had more influence on her than she would care to admit.

“Thora, listen!” He took her hand and squeezed it. She let him. “Crest’s condition is worrying. But there’s hope. Eric will fight for Crest’s life in every way he can. He—”

“I know. I spoke with Doctor Manoli. He and Haggard and Fulkar will do what they can. But the usual medical craft won’t be enough.”

“You can’t give up hope!”

“I haven’t. I spoke to Sue Mirafiore. She’ll look after Crest. She is confident that she can help him.”

“That’s an excellent idea!” The mutant girl could directly impact organs with her mental powers. “Sue will be able to help him! I’m sure of it.” While he spoke, tears welled up again in Thora’s eyes. “Thora?” Rhodan asked. “What’s wrong? You can trust Sue. She—”

“I trust her.” Thora was now holding tightly to Rhodan’s hands. She pressed them so hard that his fingers hurt. “But to help Crest, Sue must get to him first!”

Rhodan felt like he had been punched in the gut. “What’s wrong? Has he done something stupid?”

“Not yet. But he’s about to. He has disappeared from the house on São Miguel where the doctors informed him about his illness.”

“What? Where did he go?”

“Nobody knows. But I have a feeling I know where—”

“Yes? Where!”

“Crest wants to get to the dome at the bottom of the sea before

the island."

"Why? What's he looking for there?"

"For hope." Thora spoke very quietly. She lowered her head to avoid Rhodan's questioning gaze.

"Hope of what?"

"Hope that he will live." Thora took a deep breath. She lifted her head and looked straight at Rhodan. The tears in her eyes were dry now. "Rhodan, I've avoided answering the question as to why the *Aetron* flew into the solar system of the humans, of all places. I will now answer that question, if you help me prevent Crest from undertaking the madness he has in mind!"

16.

Crest da Zoltral

The Azores

Tatiana Michalovna drove at breakneck speed. The tires screeched at every curve as the telepath raced the car in the direction of Ponta Delgada. The centrifugal forces pushed against Crest, and he had to hold on with both hands to stop himself from being thrown against the door or into the driver. A thought sprang to mind—what an ironic twist of fate it would be if he died in an accident on his way to the Planet of Eternal Life!

"What's so amusing?" Michalovna asked. The fact that she asked him was a mark of respect from the telepath, signaling, *I hold you in esteem! I'm not reading your mind!*

He smiled. "Am I not allowed to amuse myself?" he responded.

"Of course. But..." she tried to find the right words. "Doctor Manoli told me what he was going to say to you."

"That I have another six weeks to live, at best? Yes, that's what he told me. But I just had another thought. Would it not be a strange kind of irony to set off to find immortal life and not succeed because you are involved in a car accident?"

"I understand." She nodded. "If you want, I can drive more slowly."

"No need. I'm not one to take unnecessary risks. But under the circumstances...it's fine." He looked at the slim woman. "It's strange, Miss Michalovna. I have learned that I am as good as dead, and yet I feel more alive than I have in a very long time."

"Is that surprising?" Michalovna said, shrugging. "We only realize the true value of something when we are about to lose it." She laughed. "Do you know what, Crest? You would have fit in well

with us in Russia. My clique and I got up to some crazy stuff."

For the rest of the drive, the telepath told him stories from her youth in St. Petersburg. They all involved her clique and all the absurd risks they took. As if nothing could go wrong, as if they were immortal.

The submarine that had brought them to the island was in the harbor of Ponta Delgada, still docked at the same place on the quay. The two Chinese women had placed folded chairs on the deck and were now sunbathing in them. When Crest got out of the car, they got up from their chairs and whispered excitedly. They hadn't been expecting him. Or had Manoli already reported his disappearance? Were they already looking for him?

Michalovna laid her hand on his lower arm. "Let me take care of this."

The telepath balanced her way deftly along the gangway and greeted the two female pilots. She spoke in a language that Crest did not understand, although it sounded quite familiar. He had heard it often in the streets of Terrania.

Michalovna was friendly, but curt. Her posture did not show the slightest trace of self-doubt. The pilots' skepticism quickly gave way to eager acceptance. They waved to Crest. The Arkonide negotiated the gangway without having to hold on, borne by a vigor that came from his determination. The pilots led them into the passenger cabin.

Crest and Michalovna put on their seatbelts. "I didn't know you spoke Mandarin," he remarked.

"Xiang," she corrected him. "A dialect that is spoken in the Huan Province where the pilots come from." She placed a hand on her forehead. "God knows, it isn't always easy being a telepath. You learn far too much about other people, things you wish you didn't know. But one advantage is that it's easier to learn foreign languages."

"What did you tell the pilots?"

“That they need you urgently in the dome, Crest. They’ve discovered something that only you can assess correctly. And, naturally, that the utmost discretion is required. Nobody must know that you are on your way there.”

“Very clever of you, Miss Michalovna.” It was an honest compliment. His plan would only work if nobody in the dome realized what had happened to him or knew what he was planning to do.

“I do what I can.” Her tone was casual, but Crest noticed that she was blinking nervously. His praise meant a great deal to her.

The machines whined loudly as they started, and the submarine left the harbor. It reached the open sea after only a few minutes. As they began descending to the dome, the floor of the submarine tipped forward.

It seemed to be taking an unbearably long time to Crest. The fast pace of the journey by car had matched the excitement he was feeling. It had distracted him, left him without any time to think about things. In comparison, the submarine seemed to be hardly moving at all. There were no windows in the cabin to look out of. And even if there had been, it would have been no use. All there was outside was the blackness of the deep sea. So there would have been no visual points of reference to show what speed they were moving at.

Crest had the chance now to lean back and do nothing. But that also meant time for doubt and fear to creep in. And they weren’t long in coming. *Have I lost my mind?* He asked himself. *I’m running away from the humans who would do anything to save my life. Who have already done so before.*

Admittedly, Manoli and Haggard thought his chances weren’t very good. But they hadn’t given up. They wanted to heal him. They were clever men, experienced at what they did. And they had Fulkar at their side, who was familiar with the most progressive medicine in the galaxy. They would find a way to save him.

Perhaps. But what would he have gained? His cure might only be

temporary. And even if he healed completely, he was an old man. How many years did he have left? Crest didn't want to die. Ever. That was why he had left Arkon behind him to travel to this remote, forgotten system. Crest da Zoltral wanted immortality.

But what if it was nothing more than a myth? A desire everyone had, born out of the desperation of old men and women who didn't want to admit that their time was over? And even if they found the Planet of Eternal life, did immortality mean he would be healed of his illness?

Crest could only hope so. He laid a hand on his chest and pressed the scroll tightly to him. He felt the pain it caused and enjoyed it, saw it as proof that he wasn't chasing a pipedream. Immortality did exist. The commander had found it.

The elderly Arkonide thought about Thora, who was like a daughter to him. He would have liked to have said goodbye to her, but that was impossible. Thora would only try and hold him back. He meant the world to her. She would never allow him to venture into the unknown.

Thora's anger was burning hot. She would be furious with him. But her fury would dissipate at some point, and she would forgive him when he returned, healed and immortal.

"Do you remember in Terrania?" Michalovna asked softly. She was also lost in thought. "I came to you when you were examining the robot Rico."

"Yes. You were..." He stopped talking as he realized that his words would hurt the telepath.

"Drunk," she said, finishing his sentence for him. "Completely drunk, alone, miserable. So miserable that I nearly jumped from your balcony."

And to certain death. Crest's room in the Stardust Tower was in one of the upper stories. Or was it? The building was now almost twice as high.

Michalovna's eyes narrowed. "Madness. I wanted to force you to take me with you on your quest for immortality, and at the same time, I sought my own end. Redemption."

"What stopped you from jumping?"

"I didn't know back then. Now I think I do. I wasn't tired of living, just tired of suffering. Nobody trusted me, and as a telepath, I was only too aware of how they judged me. I wanted the pain to stop, not life itself."

"And did it?"

She nodded. "Yes. You did not betray me to Bull. And later, when we were looking for Rico in the Gobi, Reg changed his mind about me. He finally accepted me, and that gave me courage."

The submarine reached the dome. Once it had docked at the quay, the two pilots bowed in farewell. Crest's disappearance had obviously not yet been noticed. But that could change at any minute.

"Let's go! We've got no time to lose!" He wanted to go to the transmitter. The machine of unknown provenance that the first Thort of the Ferrons had given the Arkonide Kerlon ten thousand years ago, who, in turn, had given it to his commander. Crest was convinced the commander must have left the dome through the transmitter. And it was the same transmitter that must be the gateway to eternal life. To his mind, immortality was within reach for beings who were able to build a device that allowed them to travel huge distances without losing a second of time.

Michalovna reached for Crest's lower arm and held on to it tightly. "Can we travel like this? We don't know what awaits us on the other side!"

"You're right. Battledresses would be an advantage. But I don't see how we can get a hold of any without attracting attention."

"That won't be necessary." She pulled him in another direction. "Follow me!"

Michalovna led Crest to her cabin. It was very similar to his own but had large photo prints on the wall. They showed natural landscapes: mountain peaks with snow on them, endless forests, rivers, and coastlines.

"Russia, my beloved home country, where nobody wants me," the telepath commented drily, when she saw Crest looking at them. "It must be my age. I'm already talking about my youth."

She opened a closet, reached in, and laid what she brought out of the closet on the bed. Battledress for two, as well as weapons and supplies.

"You knew that I wanted to go through the transmitter?"

"Let's say I had a pretty good hunch. Sooner or later, you would have to attempt it."

Crest examined first the battledress and then the woman who had stolen them. "Why? I was just about to go through the transmitter last time, but I turned back again."

"Yes. But you turned back because it wasn't the right time. You thought you had been cured. You believed you still had a mission to complete here among the humans. But the thought of immortality never left you. Nor me!"

They put on their suits and checked their functionality. Michalovna must have used them in the past weeks, as she was obviously very familiar with them. Her movements were routine, and it was clear that the suit's positronic had been training her.

Soon, the suits were ready to go. Power, oxygen, and water were all at a hundred percent. The last thing Crest took from the bed was the ray gun, which he held briefly in his hand before placing it in its holster. The elderly Arkonide was not a soldier, but they didn't know what to expect on the other side.

"Ready?" Michalovna asked.

"Ready."

They turned towards the door. She slid to one side.

And they found their path blocked by a lizard.

17.

Rhodan

Terrania

"Perry!" Reginald Bull slipped out from among the tangle of struts that were holding up the stage. "You old scoundrel! I knew you were up to something!" It wasn't an accusation, but an approval. The heavily built ex-astronaut stopped in front of Rhodan and Thora. "How the hell did you come up with *that* idea? It was that vision you had on Gol, wasn't it? You..."

Rhodan lifted a hand. "I'll tell you everything later, Reg, okay? We have an emergency situation on our hands."

"A what?"

Bull looked at Thora, who he hadn't taken any real notice of so far. There were tears in her eyes, and they were now running freely down her cheeks. She was also shaking.

"Oh..." Bull said slowly. "What's going on?"

"It's Crest," Rhodan told him.

"What about him?"

"He disappeared after Eric informed him about his health. Is the *Nesbitt-Breck* ready to go?"

"Yes."

Rhodan could tell from Bull's expression that there were dozens of questions he would have liked to ask. But his friend accepted the news and said nothing more. He knew Rhodan would never ask him to do anything that wasn't absolutely necessary.

"Okay, let's go!"

Rhodan took Thora by the hand, and she let him pull her with him. They parked the car beyond the glare of the spotlights. Bull sprinted ahead at a speed one would never have expected from a man with such short legs and had one of the security people give him an SUV.

Rhodan and Thora jumped into the passenger and rear seats. The vehicle sped off, throwing up a fountain of gravel on all sides as it did.

They very quickly left the plenary session of the Terran Union behind them. An assembly at which humanity would do away with its national conflicts forever. An assembly at which Perry Rhodan had renounced the position in office that would have made him the most powerful man in the history of humankind.

The thought did not move Rhodan in the slightest. Unlike Thora...

He turned around in his seat. Thora was sitting in the back, her knees tucked up to her chin. The seatbelt, which she usually fastened even for the shortest of journeys in Earth vehicles, hung loosely at her side. Her red eyes glistened with moisture and looked a little swollen as she stared at the headrest of the passenger seat. The display was showing a teaching video by the Chinese People's Liberation Army, which was the vehicle's previous owner. But her eyes were empty, looking into the distance at nothing in particular.

Thora was extremely worried about Crest, her mentor, who was also like a father to her. But there was more. And this, Rhodan sensed, was going to be more important than everything he had left behind him today.

Ras Tschubai was waiting for them in the shadow cast by the central sphere of the *Nesbitt-Breck*. Bull couldn't resist bringing the vehicle to a halt dramatically, its wheels locked at a 180-degree angle as he swung around, spraying gravel, stopping just a meter before Tschubai's feet. Rhodan asked himself what Bull would have said if he knew that Bai Jun had a similar style of driving.

Tschubai didn't even flinch, simply standing there until the

vehicle had stopped in front of him. Being a teleporter, he could have escaped an emergency in a split second merely using the power of thought.

“I heard you need help, Perry?” he said, smiling.

“Who told you? Adams?”

“Homer is busy holding his big speech—the one he never thought he would have to give. No. Bai Jun contacted me.”

“Our former archenemy doesn’t miss a thing, does he?”

Rhodan turned around when he heard loud shouting. Bull was running along the side of the *Nesbitt-Breck*, chasing away the technicians who were working on the Topsidan ship.

“Off you go!” he yelled again and again. “We’re going to launch!”

The men and women climbed or jumped down from the scaffolding they had set up around the ship’s fuselage to examine it in detail for damage. Every single one of them was gone within a minute. And a minute after that, the small crew was already in the control center.

Bull automatically sat down in the pilot’s seat and activated the systems. Holos showed the ship’s surroundings from various angles. It looked as if it was fenced in by scaffolding.

“Such a shame. All that hard work for nothing,” Bull murmured. The former astronaut had, of course, helped build the scaffolding. When the all-clear came through from the ship’s systems, he turned to Rhodan and Thora. “Where to? The Moon? Vega? Or Arkon, perhaps?”

“To the underwater dome before the Azores, to start with,” Rhodan answered. He had to suppress a laugh. Bull was an extraordinary character. The more critical the situation, the more his friend flourished.

“Above the dome location or to the dome itself?”

“To the dome.”

“It could be a tight squeeze,” Bull said, raising his eyebrows. “The fuselage of our little baby is a bit weakened. Gol was a tough nut for the ship. The pressure at three thousand meters below sea level could crack the *Nesbitt*, which would be the final demise of our star!”

It was a justified consideration. Rhodan thought it over. They had to be fast, and the Topsidan recon craft was the fastest machine they had. “Bring us to São Miguel as fast as you can, Reg! We’ll decide what to do when we get there.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Bull gave a pretend salute, then launched the *Nesbitt-Breck* at full throttle.

The ship rocked heavily. On the holos, Rhodan watched part of the scaffolding melt away and vaporize from the heat of the impulse drives, while other parts of it were blown away by the force of the blast. Then the recon craft sped towards the sky as if it had been fired by an invisible catapult. It was just under ten thousand kilometers as the crow flies from Terrania to the Azores. Bull chose the longer but faster route. As if the *Nesbitt-Breck* was a bullet, he let it climb diagonally upward into the outer layers of the atmosphere, and then plummeted down towards their destination.

Rhodan turned to Thora. “What makes you so sure that Crest is in the dome? Eric told him about his illness in São Miguel. Why would Crest return to the dome? And why in secret? Is he hoping that the complex can somehow help him stop the cancer from spreading?”

“No.” The Arkonide woman’s eyes were no longer glistening with tears. Instead, they were filled with…was it determination? “Crest hopes…” She hesitated, shook herself, and continued. “Crest hopes to find immortality.”

18.

Crest da Zoltral

Before the Azores

"Trker-Hon! What are you doing here?" the elderly Arkonide asked.

"I've been looking for you, Crest da Zoltral," the Topsidan answered.

Crest froze on the spot. How had Trker-Hon known he was in Tatiana Michalovna's cabin? He felt a surge of panic and tried to squeeze past the Wise One. He had no time for such complications. All he wanted to do was get out of the dome for good.

"You no doubt wanted to continue the conversation we were having before?" Crest asked, making a great effort to appear friendly. "I'm sure that speaking to Cyr Aescunnar has given you a lot to think about. He's an unusual man; he definitely lives and thinks outside the box. However, I'm afraid I must disappoint you. Miss Michalovna and I are on our way to an emergency exercise, and..." Crest fell silent as he realized that his outpour of words was only going to make the Wise One suspicious—which the Topsidan probably already was anyway.

Trker-Hon didn't budge. Then he said in a soft tone of voice, "I know what you're planning to do, Crest. You want to use the transmitter. You're searching for eternal life."

"What?" This sudden openness from the Topsidan was too much. The old Arkonide was no longer able to keep up his pretense. "How do you know that?"

"Until now it was a mere guess." Trker-Hon blinked with his healthy eye. "Perhaps you remember that, while we were talking, I remarked that Arkonides and Topsidans have an extraordinary amount in common. That also includes a legend about the Planet of

Eternal Life.

”It is nothing but a legend!”

“Yes. But as someone who claims to be a ‘Wise One’, I also know that there is some truth to every legend.” The Topsidan shifted his weight from one leg to the other. It was a smooth transition, from one perfectly rigid stance to another perfectly rigid stance—something that was quite impossible for mammals like Arkonides or humans. “It was my own species that—very unexpectedly and not quite voluntarily—helped me discover that the Planet of Eternal Life might actually exist. Their invasion of the Vega system seemed to me to be a very costly and tragic adventure ordered by the current Despotate. And also one that didn’t make sense. So I started looking for the real reasons. The Ferrons had nothing that was worth us fighting for. Then I discovered the transmitters. Magical devices, but worth a war? I don’t believe so. Unless the transmitters were a gateway to something bigger—immortality.”

“I don’t know how you came to that conclusion,” Crest protested. “The transmitters are mere transport devices.”

“Yes. That’s true. A civilization as advanced as the one that invented the transmitters must have been able to work miracles. It conquered space, so why should it not have conquered death as well?”

Crest stared at the Topsidan. Trker-Hon had come to the same conclusion as he had. He really was a Wise One...or just as foolish as Crest himself.

“Your explanations are interesting,” the Arkonide said casually. He looked to the left and right. They were standing in the middle of the corridor. It was a conversation that would not usually have attracted any attention, but he and Michalovna were in battledresses. He had to act fast before a crew member saw them. “What are you planning to do now? Do you want to betray us to security?”

“That’s the last thing I want to do.” The Topsidan’s expression remained as unreadable as ever. “I want to come with you, Crest.”

The lizard wanted to come with them? Crest opened his mouth to say no, but Michalovna, who had been listening silently so far, interrupted. “Trker-Hon, do you know what you are letting yourself in for? The Planet of Eternal Life might not be just a legend—at least that’s what Crest and I hope—but our hopes are only assumptions at best. We don’t know what awaits us at the transmitter on the other side. And you don’t even have a battledress to protect you in case of a potential attack!”

“There are unfortunately no suits among the humans that would fit my species.” The Wise One looked down at his scaly body. “But that is by the by.” He looked up again. “I am willing to give my life in the search for immortality. That’s what counts.”

Crest tried to read the eyes of the lizard. Trker-Hon really had demonstrated wisdom. And he was an old man like Crest himself. An old man who had taken a path in life that had alienated him from his own people. A path from which there was no turning back. It would have been cruel to refuse Trker-Hon. And foolish.

Crest cleared his throat. “It would be an honor to have you accompany us, Wise One.”

Trker-Hon gave a slight bow. “And it is an honor for me to accompany you, Derengar.”

“And for me.” Tatiana Michalovna added. “But the most urgent matter now is to get away from this corridor. If I may ask you two gentlemen to come with me?”

19.

Perry Rhodan

On the way to the Azores

"Crest is looking for *what?* He..." That was all Rhodan could manage to get out. He had already considered dozens of answers. Had expected to hear that there were far more Arkonide complexes on Earth than they had found to date. That the Earth was valuable to the Arkonides for reasons unfathomable to humans. Something, anything. But this?

He was stunned. Had he heard right? Bull and Tschubai were frozen, looking at Thora, their mouths wide open.

"Okay, just to make sure we didn't misunderstand," Rhodan said quietly, "did you just say 'immortality', Thora?"

"Yes, immortality." She said it in a defiant tone, as if she knew how crazy it sounded. "Rhodan, you asked Crest and me so many times what brought the *Aetron* to your solar system. And you were never satisfied with our answers. Rightly so. They were just excuses."

"Why didn't you just tell us the truth?"

"Would you have believed us? Do you even believe me now?" Thora did not give him a chance to answer. "Nobody apart from Crest and I knew about it. Not even the crew of the *Aetron* knew the real reason for our expedition."

"Immortality..." Rhodan said slowly, as if he was trying to make Thora's ludicrous statement seem more real by saying it out loud. "What gives you the idea that it can be found here on Earth, of all places?"

"I didn't say on Earth," she corrected him. "We were following a legend about the Planet of Eternal Life. It is firmly established in

our culture."

"That doesn't surprise me. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of religions on Earth. What they all have in common is a belief in life after death in some form or other."

"I'm not speaking about life after death." Thora grasped the arms of her seat even tighter. "I'm talking about eternal life. About not dying in the first place."

The *Nesbitt-Breck* had reached the highest point of its flight. Bull steered the ship back towards Earth. Rhodan tried to look his friend in the eye, but Bull kept his gaze stubbornly on the controls. The pilot was still ruminating over what he had just heard.

"And does Crest believe he can find immortality in the dome?" Rhodan asked, turning back to Thora.

"Not in the dome. But he believes there is a way to get to the Planet of Eternal Life via the dome."

"The transmitter!"

"Exactly. It could be a gateway to his goal."

The holos showed them that they were drawing closer to their destination: the Atlantic, with the brown mass of Africa to the east.

"Reg! What's your opinion on all this?"

"Arkonides are only human. They're just as afraid of death as we are. And if they're convinced there might be a solution, they'll naturally go for it." He shrugged. He didn't seem to be particularly happy about this insight. "You have to admit, though, that we've experienced a bunch of things over the past weeks that we never thought possible." He was almost tender in his handling of the Nesbitt-Breck's controls. "But immortality? No. That's just too outlandish."

"It's only logical!" Thora contradicted them in a sharp tone. "A culture that can construct a transmitter could also conquer the aging process."

“That’s an almost religious desire! I can’t imagine a clever man like Crest—” Bull stopped as a radio message came in. It was from the underwater dome. “Just a second.” The former astronaut listened, then he said in a flat tone of voice, “Crest is in the dome. In the room with the transmitter. Tatiana Michalovna and Trker-Hon are with him. They’ve disabled the guards”

There was absolute silence in the control center for a few seconds. Thora was the first to say something. Speaking quietly, without any hint of dispute, she asked, “And what do you say now, Mister Bull?”

“I...” Bull stroked the red stubble on his chin. He stiffened a little and said, “I say, full steam ahead!”

He bent over the control panel, and the *Nesbitt-Breck* dove into the water with its pointed bow, like a bird diving below the surface to catch a fish. They all felt it hit the surface, but the ship transitioned smoothly into the water with only the slightest of jolts. The pressure absorbers were working perfectly. And yet the strain of the underwater pressure was real, and it rose with every meter that the *Nesbitt-Breck* penetrated into the deep.

The energy shield could not protect the ship. It would have collapsed within seconds due to the burden caused by the endless masses of evaporating water. The body of the *Nesbitt-Breck* groaned. The roaring of the drives sounded muffled and was interrupted by irregular cracking sounds. Beads of sweat formed on Bull’s forehead and were soon streaming down his face in rivulets.

The former astronaut wiped his face with his sleeve without looking up. He had to regulate the thrust precisely. If it was too high, the *Nesbitt-Breck* would not be able to withstand the strain and it would break up. If it was too low, there was a risk that they would come too late to stop Crest.

Thora contacted the dome positronic. “Hold Crest back!” she ordered. “He and his companions must not leave through the transmitter under any circumstances!”

“Crest da Zoltral is of a higher rank,” the computer answered.

“You are not authorized to instruct me to interfere in his personal decisions as long as he does not endanger the dome.”

“Crest is a danger to himself! He is not in possession of his full mental faculties since learning that he only has a few weeks to live.”

“That is speculation. Can you prove it?”

“I...” Thora thought it over and then hit her palm with her fist. “Analyze his behavior over the past hours! Was it out of character?”

“Yes,” the positronic admitted. “Crest seems to be hiding something.”

Thora and Rhodan exchanged looks. What was that supposed to mean? Before Thora could ask further, the computer said, “Your assertion has enough evidence to justify action. Crest da Zoltral can use the transmitter at a later date.”

“Then stop him!”

“Your orders will be carried out.” The computer fell silent a second later. Then it said, “Execution of orders impossible. Crest and his companions have activated the shield generator that was installed to protect the transmitter.”

“Damn!” Thora spat out angrily. It was a word she had learned from the humans. “How many autonomous machines do you have with the capacity to break through a protective shield?”

“Five.”

“Order them to go to the transmitter room immediately!”

Rhodan, who had been following this conversation silently, now spoke. “Thora, I don’t think that’s a good—”

She made a gesture indicating that he should stop talking. “We have no time for discussion. Look!”

A new holo emerged in the control center. It showed the

transmitter room and must have come from a camera on one of the machines that Thora had demanded. Crest and Tatiana Michalovna were wearing battledresses, while the Topsidan Trker-Hon was carrying his shoulder bag as always. The contrast was bizarre.

“The transmitter is active!” Thora yelled. Before she had even finished speaking, Crest started moving towards the endless blackness that gaped in the middle of the glowing arc.

“Ras, quick!” The teleporter was at Rhodan’s side in a fraction of a second and took Rhodan’s and Thora’s hands.

“Good luck!” Bull called out. “I’ll bring our baby to a dry dock!”

Ras Tschubai jumped.

20.

Crest da Zoltral

Before the Azores

The transmitter was in a room that was located many stories below Michalovna's cabin. Using the central anti-grav shaft to get to the device was out of the question. That was the dome's main pathway for moving around. They wouldn't even get two stories without attracting attention.

Instead, they used one of the emergency stairways. It was steep and narrow, with just enough space for two people to walk side by side. Crest and his companions were lucky. The stairway was deserted. Humans were like Arkonides, choosing comfort wherever possible. And the humans were like children. The anti-grav shaft gave them the feeling of weightlessness, something the Arkonides took for granted but was still sensational to humans. However, for those who had a fear of heights, the anti-grav shaft was challenging, and they had difficulty using it.

There was a door at the level where the transmitter was located. It opened, and a technician entered the stairwell. Crest knew him.

"Mister Suarez! Good day!" The Arkonide hoped the technician was too surprised to draw the right conclusions. He was right. Initially.

"Good day!" the technician said, returning his greeting as he stepped aside to let Crest and his companions pass. Then he shook himself as if trying to wake up after a long sleep, saying, "Just a second, Crest! Why are you wearing a battledress?"

"Oh, just an annoying exercise. You know what they're like." Before he had even finished speaking, Crest realized he was convincing no-one.

The technician's eyes widened. "Exercise?" he said. "Nobody told

me anything about an exercise. I—”

He stopped mid-sentence as Trker-Hon pushed Crest aside, pulled a weapon out of his bag, aimed it at the technician, and fired. A glaring white beam shot out of the muzzle and hit the human, who collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been cut. His body made a thud as it hit the ground.

Crest stared at the human in disbelief, then turned to the Topsidan. “How could you do that? He didn’t want to harm us!”

“He would have foiled our plans. I couldn’t let that happen.” Trker-Hon lifted the weapon. “A paralyzer. His nervous system will be affected for two hours. Apart from some joint pain when he wakes up, he’ll suffer no side effects.”

Tatiana Michalovna came down the last stairs and said, “I thought the only weapon a Wise One used was his mind.”

“A true Wise One does well to choose his means intelligently. The paralyzer is not a weapon. All it does is disable the person who gets hit by it for a brief period.”

The telepath studied the Topsidan, and Crest thought he could detect surprise in her expression. And respect.

“I ask myself, Trker-Hon, what else you have in that bag.”

“You will find that out sooner or later.” The Topsidan kneeled down and placed the paralyzed technician in a more comfortable position.

They were just about to move on when the alarm sounded. It was a call received by pods and battledresses alike.

“To all teams! Crest da Zoltral is missing. The Arkonide is presumably experiencing an emergency. He is temporarily in a confused state of mind. Please report his location immediately if you encounter him, and make sure he remains in place so that we can administer the required medical attention. Announcement over!”

“They know I’m here!” And they were publicly referring to him as a confused old man. Crest was overcome by shame and anger. He pushed these feelings aside, realizing that the humans wanted to protect him by not telling the entire world he was facing certain death.

“Yes.” Michalovna nodded grimly. “But they don’t know what we’re intending to do. Let’s go!”

The telepath pushed open the door to the corridor. It was deserted. They reached the room where the transmitter was without any further interruptions. The pressure-tight hatch was closed.

Trker-Hon wanted to step up to the hatch to activate the opening mechanism, but Crest held him back. “No! I’ll go first!”

The hatch slid to one side, allowing them to see into the room. The transmitter was there—as were three guards. They were sitting together on stools, their weapons lying on their laps. The humans were bent far forward, poring over a virtual, three-dimensional landscape. They were playing one of their popular strategy games that reminded Crest of the fictitious games from his own culture. That must have been how the passion of the Arkonides was snuffed out over time, before his culture eventually gave up reality altogether.

The guards jumped to their feet as the Arkonide entered the room. Their hands automatically reached for their weapons. “Mister da Zoltral!” one of them cried out. “There you are! You—”

He went no further. The beam of Trker-Hon’s paralyzer hit all three guards.

Soundlessly and limp, they collapsed and fell to the floor. One of the men tumbled into the landscape of the game. It disappeared for a second, and reappeared again on his back. Crest recognized a spacesphere, fighting a space battle with ships that looked like globes that had been pierced with a long needle. Topsidans. The humans were replaying the events in the Vega system.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Crest!” Take care of the

transmitter!" Michalovna ordered him. Then the telepath turned towards the Topsidan, who was putting the paralyzer back into his bag. "Trker-Hon, help me with the guards!"

Crest shook himself out of the stiffness that had overcome him and went to the transmitter while his companions grabbed the paralyzed guards under their arms and pulled them over to the wall.

The transmitter was inconspicuous. It consisted of a platform with enough space to hold a handful of people. There were columns on both sides, chest-high and tapered to become pointed at the top.

That was all. That was the wondrous thing about it. Crest stopped before the transmitter, and a control panel appeared from nowhere. This miracle was able to transport beings in no time across huge distances that usually only spaceships could travel. Transmitters connected many of the worlds of Vega with one another. Could they also connect planets from different solar systems or cover light years? He did not doubt it for a second.

With the help of this miraculous machine, the robot Rico—himself a technical wonder—and the half-Arkonide Quiniu Soptor had fled from the dome. The transmitter had been destroyed while they fled and had regenerated itself with no help from outside. Just as the robot Rico had.

Would his own body do that too if he reached the Planet of Eternal Life?

Michalovna stepped up beside him. "Having doubts?" she whispered.

"No." Crest turned to the telepath and noticed shimmering. The walls of the room were suddenly blurry. "An energy shield?" he asked. "Where..."

"Oh, my idea. The transmitter is far too valuable to not be protected using everything at our disposal. It once magically repaired itself. But we don't know how often the machine is able to do that, do we? Better to make sure nobody without authorization

plays around with it, don't you think?"

The room was suddenly filled with a bright, glaring light. Rays of energy as thick as a human arm beamed out of the transmitter. They grew upward centimeter by centimeter, leaned towards the middle of the platform, and then came together to form an arch.

The humans had called it the archway transmitter, inspired by the Christian churches that could be found in many corners of the Earth. Places of faith in a reality that could not be grasped by the usual senses. Places of awe, places of reverence. The humans had chosen the name well.

Crest lowered his head and studied the virtual control panel. "The transmitter is ready for use," he confirmed.

"Where will it bring us?" Trker-Hon asked.

"To be honest, I haven't got the slightest idea," the Arkonide replied. "The transmitter chooses the destination autonomously."

"The same place it transmitted Rico and Quiniu Soptor to?"

"Possibly. But we can't know. The transmitter was destroyed and regenerated itself. It might have kept or reset the settings, or maybe it has automatically chosen another destination."

A radiation field had formed in the illuminated archway. A fathomless blackness swallowed the light. It looked endless to Crest. A hole they would fall into. A fall that might never end.

Or was it the endlessness of death awaiting them? They couldn't even begin to understand this technology. They could only guess what purpose it served. Should there not have been control mechanisms that prevented unauthorized persons from entering the transmitter? Would they be automatically eliminated? Or would they end up falling victim to a defect in the transmitter's functioning? The transmitter had an air of the tragic about it, yet it was not a product of magic, but of technology. This one was at least ten thousand Earth years old. Could they trust it?

Not really, Crest admitted. *But what awaits me if I turn back now?*

Certain death!

They felt a jolt. “We’re off!”

The Arkonide moved to enter the radiation field when he heard a voice call out, “No, Crest! Wait!”

It was a woman’s voice. And it belonged to the woman who meant more to Crest than any other being in the universe: Thora.

21.

Perry Rhodan

Before the Azores

Without a second having passed, Rhodan, Tschubai, and Thora landed in the dome's transmitter room. Behind and next to them were five robots—general maintenance machines. The arms, which had ray guns at the end of them, were stretched out and pointing at the transmitter.

"Crest!" Thora cried out dramatically. "No! Wait!"

The elderly Arkonide froze. He turned around in slow motion, as if he needed his entire energy just for that movement.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rhodan saw Tschubai bending over the three men who were lying unconscious against the rear wall. They must have been the guards.

Crest was shaking. "Thora," he said. His voice was also shaking. "I had hoped that both of us would be spared this farewell."

Thora stepped as close to the protective shield as possible without endangering herself. "Don't go through it, Crest! Please! You don't know what's waiting at the other end!"

Tschubai teleported away, and the three guards disappeared with him. He had to bring them to the sick bay.

"I know exactly what is waiting for me here," the Arkonide answered.

"You only believe you do! You're... The news of your illness has made you confused!"

The air fluttered as Tschubai returned, alone. He gave the thumbs up to let Rhodan know that someone was looking after the guards.

“Quite the opposite is true,” Crest said. “I can see more clearly now than I ever have in my life. I’ve waited far too long. The fear I felt about losing my oh so precious short life was too great. But now I have no fear.” Crest went towards Thora, stopping when they were only separated from one another—and the deadly energy shield—by a meter or so. “Thora, don’t worry about us. I’m not going to meet my death. Immortal life is waiting for me.” He took a step backwards again. “We’ll meet again, Thora!”

The elderly Arkonide turned around and walked towards the transmitter.

“No!” Thora screamed. “Don’t do it! You’re mistaken! You don’t have to die! Sue can—”

Her last words were drowned out by a shrill whining sound. In a fraction of a second, the helmet on Rhodan’s battledress had folded over his head. A flicker showed that his protective shield had also activated.

“Danger!” the suit Positronic said. “The shield generator!”

“What about it?” Rhodan yelled.

“A malfunction. I presume there is interference with the transmitter.”

Crest, Michalovna, and Trker-Hon froze. Then the Topsidan gesticulated towards the shield generators, reached out for Crest’s and Michalovna’s hands, and pulled them in the direction of the transmitter.

“No!” Thora roared. And then, “Fire!”

Glowing, bundled beams shot out from the robots’ ray guns, striking the shield. Rhodan was thrown backwards as his suit’s positronic tries to move him out of the danger zone. He saw two outlines next to him. It was Thora and Tschubai, whose suits were also trying to save them.

Rhodan’s helmet turned dark to compensate for the burning light. He saw Crest, Michalovna, and Trker-Hon step into the

transmitter and disappear.

Then the shield generator exploded.

Rhodan was thrown against the wall with a force that knocked the breath out of him. The generator was making a loud whining noise. Rhodan felt dangerously hot as his suit was no longer able to absorb the sweltering heat. The shield capacity climbed to 110 percent, then 113, where it remained for a few seconds before dropping rapidly as the hatch was no longer able to withstand the pressure or heat in the room any longer. With a deafening creaking, it was torn from its hinges, and the pressure and heat flowed into the corridor.

Tschubai was lying next to Rhodan on his stomach.

"Ras!" Rhodan cried, bending over his comrade to turn him onto his back. The teleporter's body was limp, his eyes closed. "He's unconscious," the suit positronic reported. "No serious injuries."

Rhodan noticed a movement from the corner of his eye. Thora. She was crawling on all fours towards the place where, only a few seconds ago, the transmitter had been standing.

"No!" Rhodan whirled round and threw himself on top of Thora, using his entire weight to press her to the ground.

"Let me go!" Thora struggled against him. "I have to get Crest!"

"He's not here anymore! I saw him go through the transmitter!"

The room became clearer until eventually they could see again as the fans of the air supply sucked out the smoke. All that was left where the transmitter and shield generator had been was a puddle of molten metal. The generator's energy storage must have been discharged all at once.

Tears sprang from Thora's eyes and ran down her cheeks. "It's my fault! I shouldn't have given the order to fire!"

"The generator would have exploded in any case." Rhodan let go of her. She remained lying where she was. "You acted with the best

of intentions."

"That's easy for you to say!"

"You did everything you could under the circumstances. I respect that."

"What use was it, though?" Thora said, sitting up. "Crest is an old man with a fatal illness. He's lost. The transmitter is irreparably destroyed. We can't even follow him now!" She made a fist out of her right hand and punched the floor.

"I don't think that's true."

"Do you have eyes, Rhodan?" She yelled, turning her head towards him with a dirty look. "The transmitter no longer exists!"

"This one doesn't. But there is a saying here on Earth: 'Many paths lead to Rome.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rhodan stood up and held out his hand to her. "Come on, let's see if Ras is ok."

Thora hesitated, then took his hand. Her grip was firm.

22.

Homer G. Adams

Terrania

September 15, 2036

Morning dawned over Terrania. Homer G. Adams was standing on the fiftieth floor of the Stardust Tower, watching the sun climb up over the eastern horizon. He was alone in the office he had set up for Perry Rhodan. Filling the post he had intended Rhodan to take on.

The elderly, hunchbacked British man hadn't been able to sleep a wink since the plenary sessions of the Terran Union. Just like the night before that. He was too excited, had too many things to do. Real and supposed small tasks, literally hundreds of them. Too many for a normal person.

But not for Homer G. Adams. He was not a normal person. His memory was perfect. He was able to recall every single second of his seventy years of life. His first kiss when he was nineteen with the girl next door, Mary McDonnell. Her tongue had been moist and reminded him of a dishcloth. And Mary smelled of the cheapest perfume on sale at Boots. His first goal in the British Premier League. The media went wild over the disfigured young man from the poverty-stricken northeast of England. It ended with 4:2 against Tottenham Hotspur. Adams had scored the second goal, passed to him by Alwick just outside the penalty box. Dawson, the goalkeeper, had underestimated him. He remembered the ruptured ligament that had abruptly ended his soccer career in England...

And then the first million he had earned with stock options in the dot.com bubble. Then his arrest when the bubble burst and his books didn't add up. The officer, Cormac Willis, who had a mustache, blue eyes, and two daughters, Phyliss and Mary, five and seven years old. The policeman had shown him photos while they were driving to the station.

The desperation that overcame him when they sentenced him to three years in prison was still fresh in his mind today, as if he had only just heard it for the first time. But he had not been sentenced today. The plenary session had elected him the first Administrator of the Terran Union. Not the huge landslide that Perry Rhodan had aimed for, but still overwhelming.

Homer G. Adams now possessed more power than any human before him. And more responsibility.

The disk of the sun had broken free of the horizon. Its orange rays shone down on the city of Terrania. Adams shielded his eyes from the blinding sun with the flat of his hand. Numerous people and vehicles were already out and about. The inhabitants of Terrania—the Terrans, as they proudly called themselves—were fired up with an eagerness to create a better world.

Humanity was counting on him, the old man with the hunched back.

And they could be certain of one thing: Homer G. Adams would never forget it.

Episode 18: The First Thort

By Michelle Stern

“Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.”

(Isaac Asimov)

1.

The Search

Zardik

September 15, 2036

The *Nesbitt-Breck* descended into the moon's thin atmosphere.

Perry Rhodan safely steered the Topsidian recon ship towards the distant mountains and rivers that melded with the bright surface. His movements were calm and confident. By now, he had mastered the faster-than-light ship just as thoroughly as Bull had.

Behind them was Groll, the thirteenth planet of the Vega system, a sparkling gemstone in the blackness of space. Rhodan could also see the planet's inner moon on one of the holos; Tholus was a shimmering blue disc in Vega's light, following its own orbit like a distant mirror image of Zardik. Like sisters, the two moons circled side by side, though Zardik was much farther out and took a good six months to make its way around Groll.

The second moon of the thirteenth planet, Rhodan thought, celebrating the idea. *The thirteenth planet of more than forty. Our own solar system is so small in comparison! It's like I come from a little toy land.*

The ship hurtled towards the moon's surface, bursting through a blue-green sky. Rhodan throttled the speed. The impulse drive in the cylinder hull was, like the enormous transition drive, barely audible in the inner sphere. Only a soft humming from the walls of the bridge exposed the technical wonder of the ship Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull had been able to salvage from the surface of planet Gol.

"I'll take over, Rhodan." Thora looked at the readings on the detection devices, tense. The Arkonide's posture was rigid, as if frozen solid. A line had formed at the corner of her mouth that

Rhodan had never noticed there before. “You look for any signs. It would be best if the entire group does the same. We’ll get quicker results.” With those words, Thora cast a glance around the bridge with its various terminals.

Rhodan saw wordless agreement from Bull, Sue, and Chaktor in their gazes. The teleporter Ras Tschubai turned directly to the monitor at his station to start the evaluation and manual supplementation of the Positronic data sets.

Only Lossoshér remained bent forward in an uncomfortable position on the pneumo-seat designed for Topsidans, not responding to Thora’s request. The transmitter guardian was bowed deeply over a holographic record beamed out of a cube-shaped device in his hands. Ferron letters hung in the air, demanding his complete attention. Presumably, he was once again studying what were sacred records for him regarding the transmitters’ locations and his people’s history. From what Rhodan knew, the cube contained numerous books, among them the Book of the Great War and that of the Great Light. Was Lossohér once again verifying whether he’d drawn the right conclusions in his research about the transmitter? They were reliant on him and his insights.

Briefly, Rhodan considered broaching the topic of the transmitter system with Lossoshér again, but then he let it be and launched the program that initiated the search for buildings. Beside him, Thora kept her gaze focused on the controls. Her face was a mask, her eyes feverish.

Rhodan gave her an encouraging smile. “We’ll find him.”

She raised her head and smiled back fleetingly. It looked rehearsed. “Yes. We have to—and fast. Time’s running out.” She looked over at Lossoshér and lowered her voice. “Are you sure that Lossohér can help us? Yes, I know he’s Ferrol’s leading scientist and highly regarded by the Thort, but I don’t know if his so-called holy texts will really get us anywhere. I had extracts of it translated for me, and I can only vaguely follow his interpretations.”

“We have to trust in his abilities,” Rhodan replied equally quietly. “I’m sure he’s doing his best. He owes us, and I don’t think

he's forgotten that."

In his mind's eye, Rhodan saw the mountain of rubble and debris he'd rescued Lossoshér from. He had essentially saved the Ferron's life when the vault below the Thort's Red Palace had collapsed during the Topsidans' attack. If he hadn't dug Lossoshér out, the transmitter guardian would have fallen into the enemy invaders' hands or died on the spot due to the shelling.

Thora twisted her mouth. "You're too naive, Rhodan. Your belief in inherent goodness contradicts my experience. Not every intelligent being falls over itself in gratitude just because someone helps them."

This pointed observation related to Chaktor, the second Ferron in their small party. The astronaut was much closer to Rhodan than Lossoshér was and trusted him almost unconditionally. Chaktor had insisted on coming because he wanted to accompany the Lightbringer. Now that a peaceful settlement had, with Rhodan's help, been achieved between the Topsidans and Ferrons, he hardly left Rhodan's side.

Rhodan was genuinely glad of their positive relationship. In Terrania, he had set up an embassy for the Ferrons. In a galactic sense, Vega was practically just around the corner. The blue-skinned Ferrons were the first aliens that humanity could exchange information with after the two Arkonides, Thora and Crest. This was already revealing that there were many differences, but also far more similarities.

As they spoke, Rhodan checked over the first results from the Positronic. Thora steered the ship deep over a mountain range so that the sensors could effectively scan the surface. Blue-white snow gleamed on rugged peaks that resembled the Himalayas. The air seemed different than on Earth. Even though the atmosphere was thinner, the gas mixture looked thicker somehow, as if it had more substance.

Rhodan's thoughts returned to Crest. "It's the most sensible lead," he said softly.

Thora's face closed up. "It's my fault. Because of me, the transmitter in the Azores that Crest was using was destroyed. The way is only blocked due to my carelessness."

"You know that's not true, Thora. You couldn't have done anything. The shield generator in the transmitter room would have exploded even without your intervention."

The destruction of the transmitter in the underwater dome had forced them to find another way. Rhodan had been the one to hit upon the idea of asking Lossoshér for help. By virtue of the lore, the transmitter guardian had a clue as to which other two transmitters could be connected to the one on Earth. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to simply use any transmitter of their choosing. The way they were linked was far more complicated than Rhodan had initially hoped. Also, after an extensive examination, there was no *known* transmitter that led to Earth. However, Lossoshér believed that a forgotten transmitter existed on Zardik, supposedly linked with a faraway blue planet with only a single moon.

Lossoshér's knowledge perhaps represented Crest's last chance, as the Arkonide was suffering from a deadly cancer. That alone had driven the elderly alien to the act of madness of stepping through the transmitter and into the unknown along with Tatiana Michalovna and the Topsidan Trker-Hon. Crest was seeking the world of eternal life to heal him.

Meanwhile, hope for Crest's recovery stood only meters away from Rhodan. Thoughtfully, Rhodan observed Sue Mirafiore out of the corner of his eye. The young woman looked more like a girl, her distinctly maturer mind still in the body of a ten-year-old. Sue's inner strength was out of proportion with her outward appearance. She could heal and take lives. Her special para-gift presented a means of helping Crest. That was why Rhodan wouldn't give up. He would find Crest and save humanity's mentor.

The silent alarm mode came online; the rangefinder sounded. Rhodan turned away from the scan results.

"Thora! Sensor readings!"

He accessed the relevant programs. Several impulses were rising up from the moon and rapidly gaining altitude, approaching the ship with determination. Rhodan counted at least forty of them, targeting them like projectiles.

Thora whipped around to face him, startled. “An attack?”

“Probably not. It’s more likely—”

“What the hell’s going on?” Bull exclaimed from his station. “Something’s flying at our altitude! I thought this moon was uninhabited.”

“Thora, evade them!”

Thora’s reaction came at a noticeable delay. Rhodan was on the verge of pushing the Arkonide to the side and taking over the controls himself. Her worries about Crest had muted her usual commanding presence.

At last, the situation seemed to hit home for Thora too. Her fingers raced across the panels. “Positronic, calculate a new course!”

She had barely finished her sentence when Rhodan noticed a dark spot in the visual display. “Something’s smacked against the external optics and given us a blind spot.”

Unease spread across the bridge. Chaktor and Bull were both watching from their stations while Sue tightly grasped her chair as if fearing a crash.

“Problems in the ventilation system,” Chaktor reported almost in unison with the Positronic informing them of the same.

At the same time, the holo rotated and zoomed into one of two red-marked points, showing a further warning.

“The inertial dampers...” Hastily, Rhodan sought more detailed data.

“What—” Tschubai began.

The ship faltered, then plunged several meters without warning as if falling into an air pocket.

Lossoshér, Thora, and Chaktor screamed the loudest. Sue gave an agonized groan. Rhodan felt as if he were on a roller coaster. He clenched his teeth. Why had the dampers dropped out?

"What are you guys doing over there?" Bull's glare made it clear that he'd rather have been piloting the ship himself. "God, Perry, the *Nes* isn't a drop tower ride."

"It must have been a flock of large flying creatures," Rhodan asserted soberly, ignoring his friend's sarcastic barb. "Prior damage to the *Nesbitt-Breck* means we're missing an energy grate at the rear of sector C. Something the size of an eagle was sucked into the ship, temporarily impairing the impulse drive and inertial dampers."

"Galanés," Lossoshér said dryly. "The largest mammals living on this moon. They fly in herds and ascend to remarkable heights, which can absolutely lead to problems with air traffic. I've read a paper on the species."

Thora's head whipped around, her red eyes gleaming in the artificial light. "Thank you for the timely warning."

The recon ship gained height but suddenly plunged downward a second time. The feeling of being on a roller coaster was renewed and only enhanced by the others' screams.

Rhodan ignored the uncomfortable feeling of his stomach being pushed upwards. Focusing, he balanced out a swerve that could easily have become a spin.

Chaktor lurched out of his seat. Something fell from his breast pocket. From the corner of his eye, Rhodan saw Tschubai stand up and offer the Ferron his hand.

As Thora's copilot, Rhodan had the presence of mind to slightly change course to avoid the last animals of the herd. "No worries," he said reassuringly. "A few more seconds and we'll have enough distance. The Galanés can't seriously endanger us."

Tschubai helped Chaktor up as the Ferron fumbled hectically at his pocket. “My album...”

Behind Rhodan, Lossoshér’s voice sounded venomous. “Better you should take reading cubes with you instead of colorful little pictures, Chaktor.”

Rhodan turned and saw Tschubai give Chaktor the device with the visual recordings of his family. Smiling in relief, Chaktor activated it. One of his wives waved at Rhodan in miniature.

With a friendly nod, Rhodan turned away. On the screen, he saw the Galanés passing by via the external optics. They looked like oversized flying dogs, a fur-like orange trim stretched over their triangular bodies.

“We’re out.” Relieved, Rhodan leaned back. “The Positronic will give us an early warning next time if we bump into other flying creatures. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting this given the thin atmosphere and sparse plant life.”

Next to him, Thora lowered her haid. “Can you take over for a while, Rhodan? My concentration is obviously impaired. I think I need a break.”

“By all means.”

Thora transferred overall control to him and stood up. With unsteady steps, she left the bridge. Rhodan watched her go. No doubt, she’d rest up in one of the quarters in the cylinder section. And, he was sure, this rest would last no longer than a few hours, just as her others had over the last few days. In the search for Crest, Thora gave herself no quarter.

Sue Mirafiore

Sue looked at the fascinating world the Positronic holographically revealed to her. Barren rocks and mountains rose up among the scattered greenish light. The landscape didn’t just

look real; it seemed to live and breathe. Steam wafted from icy rivers, green meadows growing on their flanks like lonely islands on the desolate moon. Even where nothing but rock covered the ground, there were colors and shapes galore, ever more patterns that looked alien and magical.

"Zardik is so huge," Sue whispered in Bull's direction. Since their escape from the Fantan's captivity, she felt especially close to him. Bull had done everything he could to make sure she and Sid returned to Earth.

"Bigger than Mars." Bull grimaced. "And they call it a *moon*. I thought Perry was exaggerating on Gol before our mission when he told me about the Vega system." He grinned mischievously. "But then I flew here with him myself and got a real picture of it. Pretty impressive, I have to admit."

"It fascinated Sid too, even though he was only here briefly." Sue thought about Sid Gonzáles, the teleporter with whom she'd lived in the Pain Shelter run by John Marshall before Terrania had become their new home. *It's crazy. Sid was always the one who couldn't wait to get into space. Back when I called him Spark, space had been the only thing on his mind. Now I'm flying through the Vega system with all its wonders, and Sid is in Terrania.*

She would gladly have taken Sid with them, because he hardly spoke about anything but the Vega system, but Perry wanted to keep numbers as low as possible. "A small, hard-hitting strike team," he'd said during the preliminary meeting in Terrania.

And Sue had been there. After all, she had a gift that could heal Crest. In the end, this ability was what opened all doors to her. Her experience as a Besun of the Fantan had made her grow even stronger, and she keenly felt that. It made her even more confident that she could save Crest.

Zooming in on the hologram, Sue noticed a particularly distinctive mountain and turned it to see all sides. It made her think of the only day in Texas with snowfall. Its contours reminded her of the snowman she'd built in the shelter's garden with the other children after an uncharacteristic hefty blizzard. Back then, she'd

still only had one hand. She lightly pressed her fingers together as if she herself could hardly comprehend having two hands now. The hand's regrowth still seemed a miracle to her.

Although Sue wanted to find Crest just like the others, she found it hard to pull herself away from the magic of the alien moon and double-check the Positronic's multiple suggestions. Usually, a few glances were enough to rule each one out as a Ferron-made structure.

Luckily, the search was fully automated. Checking the data themselves alongside the Positronic's analysis had been Thora's suggestion. Although the *Nesbitt-Breck*'s damage had been mitigated with replacement parts from the *Tosoma*, Thora didn't trust that the ship was at full operational capacity. The incident with the Galanés had only convinced her more, no doubt. She didn't want to make any mistakes in the search for her adoptive father.

"You okay?" Bull asked.

Sue turned to him. "Yeah, I'm good. I was just thinking about Crest." She lowered her voice. "What if we get there too late?"

"Don't worry. I'm sure Crest's still alive. A guy like that won't let himself be beaten so easy."

She smiled gratefully. He meant what he said. Sue had never heard him lie or give half-truths like other grown-ups.

"Hey!" Bull suddenly exclaimed. "I have something! Finally, for the first time in three hours, something promising! Number 523g."

Silence reigned for a while. The others were almost certainly pulling up the relevant image and studying it, just as Sue was. They had already been through two rounds of false hope. But the sight that appeared before Sue set her heart racing.

"It looks like a dome!"

Bull smiled. "What were you expecting, a pyramid?"

"This is it," Rhodan interjected. "I'm going down. Ras, would

you be so kind as to inform Thora personally? I think this news'll cheer her up."

The teleporter stood.

With fascination, Sue took in the snowy mound with the symmetrical forms beneath it. She felt butterflies in her stomach. It could be a transmitter. Despite all the transitions she'd experienced and lived through so far, she couldn't imagine what it would be like to walk through a transmitter arch.

She closed her eyes and felt a pleasant giddiness wash over her. Over the past few weeks, her world had grown pretty damn large and rich.

Perry Rhodan

Rhodan looked at the building, which was at least four meters tall. Snow covered it like a thick cloak, concealing the dome-shaped outline underneath. Only the recon ship's Topsidian technology had made it visible.

He turned to Bull. "Looks like a job for your robots."

His friend beamed. "A1 is ready to go. I'll get him."

While Bull walked back over to the ship, Thora stepped closer to the structure. With a gloved hand, she wiped away some of the snow at chest height. Rhodan could make out a gray surface that looked like steel.

Lossoshér was walking up and down, eyeing up the mound. "It could be a transmitter. The size is right. I've found several of them in domes already. Besides, there's nothing else artificial on this moon. In contrast to its brother, it doesn't have any mineral deposits or other resources of value."

Sue went to Thora and joined her in wiping the snow away. Tschubai, meanwhile, just stood there, still as a statue, staring reverently at what they had found.

Rhodan felt a sense of awe when he considered what might be lying in wait before them. The Ferron transmitters were thousands of years old. With them, unimaginable distances could be crossed in an instant. He couldn't help thinking of the seven-league boots from the fairy-tale...and Bull's old joke that he'd better be careful not to get torn in half.

Bull returned. Next to him, a robot a little under two meters high was driving along the uneven terrain. Despite the deep snow, it moved safely and evenly on its various rollers. Terran and Arkonide technology were united in the machine, although the Terran upgrades mostly drew on Arkonide designs. It was Terrania's first attempt at modifying Arkonide combat robots. It was true that A1, or PROTO, as Bull tended to call it, still couldn't be considered their own construction, but it was a milestone on the way there.

Bull wasn't a military man, but his features held a certain inventor's pride as he set the nimble robot working. Much faster than any of them could, the glossy black machine started clearing the dome of snow and ice, employing six arms with extendable parts ending in what looked like fans. To reach higher areas, it began to fly. The hissing sound of its propulsion sounded overloud in the silence of the snow-covered landscape.

Rhodan stared out across the plateau on which they found themselves. It ended in a craggy cliff that fell sharply downward. Far below them flowed one of the moon's few rivers, picking its way through reddish brown stone. Patches of greenery bordered the river. The image looked peaceful, undisturbed in a way few regions were on Earth by now. It made him feel a respect for nature. Even under these conditions, life found a way.

"This must be the entrance!" Thora waved feverishly in his direction. "Come on, Rhodan."

He joined her. There was a barely visible groove in the metal surface. "Do you see an opening mechanism?"

All seven of them searched—even Lossoshér took part—but they found neither a control panel nor an indication of any kind of switch. Thora's fingers slid along the metal ever more frantically.

“Ras.” Rhodan turned around to face the teleporter. “Can you jump inside with Lossoshér? Maybe you can do something from in there.”

Tschubai nodded in assent and Lossoshér came closer, looking nervous. His blue skin seemed a shade darker to Rhodan. The unusually large Ferron stepped uncertainly through the snow, reminding the astronaut of a gray heron.

They stepped back from the shimmering blue dome and made way for Lossoshér and Tschubai. A few seconds later, both men disappeared. Only their footprints showed that they’d ever been there.

Thora shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her boots sinking ankle-deep into the snow. “We should put on protective suits. On Zardik, the atmosphere may be breathable and the gravity bearable, but who knows where we’ll come out on the other side.”

“First we have to make sure it’s actually a transmitter,” Bull countered. He gave PROTO a sign. The robot floated through the air and came back to them, turning a perfect somersault along the way. Sue clapped her hands, smiling.

Rhodan suppressed the observation that, despite all the modifications, PROTO’s core functionality was still that of an Arkonide combat robot. What lay hidden under the black paint and polished surface cut a stark contrast to Bull’s cute demonstration. He knew Bull couldn’t be proud of the machine’s destructive power. His friend was disgusted by war and the military. Bull could take credit for PROTO having a stun function and for the whole party’s beamers having the same thanks to a slight adjustment that had made them multifunctional.

Thora twisted the corners of her mouth. “Gimmickry!” Her expression showed Rhodan how backward she found Bull’s modifications. Human technology still lagged far behind that of the Arkonides.

But that won’t always be true. Terrania is growing, and our products and capabilities are growing day by day along with the city. We haven’t

come to a standstill like the Arkonides. We're still growing. And Thora knows that.

Thora turned away from Bull's demonstration and stomped through the snow. A few minutes passed, during which she paced back and forth while Bull and Sue made the robot perform one trick after another. Chaktor stood with them and watched the display, rapt. Rhodan was struck by how light the Ferron was on his feet as he followed the robot. The man's small, compact body contrasted starkly with the floating manner of his movements in what was, for him, low gravity.

A hissing sound abruptly drew everyone's attention. In front of them, a piece of the silvery material, about two by two meters, folded down into the dome. The silhouettes of Tschubai and Lossoshér stood out amid Vega's pale blue light.

Lossoshér ran his hand over a panel on the wall. Blinding white lights forced Rhodan to squint. The transmitter guardian bent his upper body slightly, as if to indicate a bow.

"Welcome to the Zardik transmitter."

Thora went in first, Rhodan following. Behind them, he heard a quiet exchange between Sue and Chaktor. The new translator let them understand each other with no issues whatsoever. The Positronic, injected into the fatty tissue, found an individual way to dock with each wearer's nervous system, then shortly afterward made it possible to communicate with aliens. The translator reacted to the speaker's intentions and only became active when necessary. The devices were prototypes, but so far they were working perfectly.

They followed a metal-walled passage that wound deeper into the dome like a snake, the floor angled sharply downward. In the bright light, they could see every detail, though there wasn't much to see. The round passage was completely empty. Its walls shimmered in the light, casting puzzling reflections onto the ceiling. They reminded Rhodan of the reflections of rippling water, except that there was no water anywhere. It had to come down to specific properties of the metal.

After a few more meters, they reached a room with level ground. Thora paused in the open doorway. Rhodan stepped up beside her and took a look at the transmitter that stood in the center. A platform offered enough space for a handful of people. Like other transmitters, this one, when activated, looked like a support arch that had been stripped of its function. Two columns towered up on the left and right, tapering off toward the top. Blue light shot out of them in the form of arm-thick energy beams, forming the upper edge. The transmitter was free-standing in the room, an entrance into the unknown. On the side, a row of panels gleamed, integrated into the arch at waist and chest height. For most Ferrons, they were at shoulder height, letting them comfortably operate the controls while standing.

Thora surveyed the control panels. “What do you think, Lossoshér? Can you initiate a controlled crossing?”

Lossoshér wavered before answering. “At first glance, it doesn’t differ significantly from other examples. I think so, yes.”

Thora furrowed her brow. “You’re not sure?”

Rhodan could tell how nervous the elderly Ferron was. His voice sounded self-assured, but his sunken eyes seemed to be looking for an escape route. His shoulders slumped. “I can lead us through the transmitter, then, in the worst case, straight back out again.”

“Wonderful,” Thora said curtly. “Then what are we waiting for? Carry out your checks so we can set out.”

Rhodan put a hand on her shoulder. “First we’ll go back to the ship and equip ourselves properly. You’re the one who said we don’t know where we’ll end up. Oxygen masks alone might not be enough.” He turned to Lossoshér. “Or do *you* know what’s waiting for us? Do you know this transmitter’s destination?”

“I’m afraid not,” Lossoshér admitted.

“All right, then. Let’s do this.”

Rhodan looked around at the group with an encouraging smile.

Lossoshér wasn't the only one looking tense. Sue and Chaktor, too, showed signs of apprehension, as did Bull, even if he hid it outstandingly well. Only a light twitching at the right side of his mouth revealed to Rhodan that his friend was uneasy.

"We'll pick up the equipment we need, then go get Crest back."

2.

Savior of the Universe

Terrania

September 15, 2036

The stars shone above the Gobi. The sparkling lights of suns and planets shimmered in the darkness, painting their pictures in the night sky. The air was cool and smelled slightly salty. A breeze brushed past the tarpaulins, making them flutter. Aside from the sound of beating tent flaps and the barely detectable scratching of sand on stone, all was silent.

“Do you nearly have it open?” Mildred Orsons whispered into the Arkonide helmet she had “borrowed” with the help of Allan D. Mercant. She and Julian Tifflor were both wearing the same model. They’d managed to seal up both helmets at the bottom and activate the internal coms. Every word spoken out loud echoed in the night, but this way, they could communicate in a fashion that would seem silent to any observers.

“Give me a moment,” Julian hissed back. His brown eyes were fully focused on the security door of the building that towered in front of them. A rectangular field with a chip slot gleamed by the doorway.

Mildred gulped. Her stomach was churning, and yet she felt alive in a way she rarely had before. *We’re crazy. We’re breaking into the Lakeside Institute. We must be the first ones ever to attempt it.* Mildred liked being a little crazy. Just as she loved the tingling in her belly.

Julian pulled out a chip card that he’d received from one of the Lakeside Institute’s employees. The lab assistant had packed in her job a few hours ago to go back to her old life in Tehran. Not everyone was made for the demands and conditions of Terrania.

Mildred admired the way Julian had coaxed the card out of the

woman, Shari Ghüren, that afternoon. He hadn't even needed to offer any money. At the same time, Mildred had felt just a touch of jealousy.

Stupid bullshit, she chided herself. She found the jealousy presumptuous and didn't like it. He wasn't her property. Besides, Ghüren had only handed over the card because she was one of the insiders who knew what Mildred, Julian, and Timothy Harnahan had done for humanity. Thanks to their help, Crest had managed to take control over the *Tosoma* and pit the battleship against the Fantan. Sure, that hadn't really been needed in the end, since the Fantan had withdrawn to the Vega system, but Mildred, Julian, and Timothy's maverick space voyage had still carved them out a special place in Terrania. Not least because Timothy had been absorbed by a being called Harno and it looked to all outside parties as if he'd sacrificed himself for Terrania.

Mildred saw it differently. Timothy wanted to be in space, and he'd seized his chance. She wondered if he could see them from Titan or some other heavenly body. Or was he light years away by now, in the places he'd always dreamed of?

"Got it!" The door silently slid open. "After you, milady."

Mildred followed Julian's gallant invitation and squeezed through the gap, finding herself in a long white corridor. Weak emergency lighting fell on the pale green linoleum floor.

Julian closed the door behind them, took Mildred's hand and led her into an unlocked side room close to the entrance. Yellow light glinted off their helmets, illuminated cleaning buckets, a shelving unit filled with cleaning products, and a knee-high, deactivated robotic vacuum cleaner.

As planned, Julian pushed a white lab coat into her hand—Shari Ghüren's—and donned an identical garment himself, which he'd made specially for this purpose. They switched off the helmets and left them behind one of the buckets.

Julian led her along in the darkness. His hands left a pleasant tingling sensation on her hips. "If they catch us, I'll say it was all

my fault."

Mildred snorted. "Come out of your Lego wonderland. In the grown-up world, everyone's responsible for their own actions."

Julian kissed her, and Mildred reciprocated. Her heart was racing, the feeling of being alive reaching a new apex. Julian being near her, his scent, the taste of his lips...it all made the moment complete. She knew what she was doing, dangerous though it was. They were breaking into the Lakeside Institute of Mental and Physical Health—an undertaking that definitely wouldn't look good on their resumes if they got caught.

She found it hard to pull herself away from him. He felt so damn good. There was strength in his arms to hold her and protect her. At the same time, he was the little boy who she mothered once in a while with an inner twinkle in her eye...maybe because being strong for others let her rise above herself. Right after Timothy's momentous decision, Julian had needed a shoulder to lean on, and Mildred had willingly offered it.

They snuck out of the storeroom, Julian going in front with purpose. He knew where their destination was and led Mildred up a staircase next to two not-yet-operational anti-grav elevators. Shari Ghüren had worked in the department for the experimental application of alien medical knowledge, and she'd provided them with all the information they needed. The Xeno—as the department was colloquially called by the employees—was on the third floor up. Most employees still lived in tents around the institute. Like the rest of Terrania, Lakeside was growing from week to week. One day, the facility would no doubt be quite an impressive sight.

They went along another hallway with a green floor and emergency lighting and found the door on the left with the number seven.

Julian nodded to Mildred. She nodded back. They were here. With a deep breath, she pulled on the handle and stepped into the room in front of him.

Mildred squinted at the starlight streaming through the wide

panoramic window. Outside, the Juyan salt lake glimmered, and behind that, Terrania rose up. It was never dark there. The Stardust Tower glowed blue in the night like a laser sword. It seemed to grow a tiny bit higher every day.

As impressive as the view was, Mildred didn't take the time to admire it. She feverishly looked around the room. No sign of anyone. Had Ghüren given them false information?

A glaring white light flashed on. Mildred whirled around, her eyes hurting. She let out a suffocated scream as an invisible hand grabbed her by the throat and yanked her off the floor. The feeling of breathlessness was crushing.

It wasn't going any better for Julian. He was choking and cursing as well. Mildred could see the tips of his boots hanging in the air above the ground. She couldn't think clearly, and in her panic she remembered the Krav Maga course she'd attended in Seattle. The instructor's voice rang out in her mind. *Thirty seconds, if someone's choking you. That's all you get. Then it's over.*

At least five possible counters shot through her head. But how was she meant to apply defensive techniques when her opponent didn't even have hands and arms to target? She flailed uncontrollably and saw Julian kicking against the air. Then she suddenly flew across the room, slammed into the wall not far from the ceiling, and slid down a few centimeters.

Her ribs hurt; one elbow burned sensitively. Side by side with Julian, her body hung against the wall, pressed into it as if nailed in place. The pressure on her throat subsided. She coughed and gasped for breath.

"It's not nice to interrupt a poor Ilt's sleep," a squeaky voice said in English with a strange sing-song quality. "Who are you and why are you bothering me?"

Julian began first. "Julian Julianlor and Mildred Orsons. We're friends...and...have a favor to ask."

"A favor?" came the derisive reply. "You could have put in a

written request. Why didn't you come during the day like all the others? And why do you keep thinking that same weird crap over and over?"

Mildred cleared her throat. "Let us down, Gucky. Please." Like Julian, she was repeatedly thinking a sentence they'd decided on in advance. The thought circled inside her like a mantra, protecting her from thinking about Gucky.

The Ilt let them slide down the wall until their feet touched solid ground. He still held them in place. "Well? What is this constant 'per-aspera-ad-astra' gobbledygook in your minds supposed to be? Have you just escaped from a Latin course?"

"It's a form of protection," Julian replied. "If we think about our intentions too strongly, another telepath might pick up on it. We know the Lakeside Institute wasn't set up just for Xeno research. It's a hideout for mutants."

"Well, I never," Gucky said with an exaggerated yawn. "So what if it is? You could still have visited at a sociable hour. Come back tomorrow, after four o'clock tea. I want to go back to bed."

Only now did Mildred finally succeed in lowering her chin and looking down. A one-meter-high creature waddled out from the shadow of a closet, looking like a mixture of a mouse and beaver. A single incisor jutted from his mouth, gleaming as he smiled. Mildred had already seen this gesture after Gucky had arrived in Terrania. The tooth seemed to glow fluorescently.

Julian's voice was emphatic. "No. We can't do that. They won't allow you to help us. You're too valuable."

The incisor flashed. "I am! That's true! And I'm my own master. What is it you want?"

Now Julian's voice sounded strained. "Read it in our thoughts."

As agreed, Mildred loosened her mental discipline and thought of Julian's father, who had disappeared after the Supreme Court trial against Crest two months earlier. They'd done everything they

could to uncover his fate, with no success. Mildred showed Gucky how kindhearted Julian and his father were. How they stood up for others. *Help William Tifflor. He's a good person. If anyone can find him and save him, it's you.*

Now it was out. Mildred held her breath.

Gucky let them go. The pressure on their throats disappeared altogether. Relieved, Mildred rubbed her aching elbow.

Julian stepped forward. "Will you help us, Gucky?"

The alien folded his arms in front of his furry chest. He wore no clothes but didn't seem embarrassed by that. "You're projecting your own character onto others, sport. A typical human error. Just because *you* stand up for total strangers doesn't mean *I* have to."

Mildred noticed Julian tensing up. His father had called him "sport" once in a while—a nickname that Julian didn't much value and that would inevitably remind him of the tension between him and his father before the latter's disappearance. William had always wanted his son to become a star lawyer like him, but Julian hadn't wanted to follow in his footsteps. Gucky must have read the word "sport" in Julian's thoughts and consciously used it to provoke him.

"Some 'Protector of the Universe,'" Julian snapped back.

Gucky scoffed. "Savior. It's *Savior* of the Universe. And your father is not the universe. So why should I save him?"

"Because you can."

"I can also spend the whole day lazing around to my heart's content instead of making other people's problems my own."

Mildred stepped up beside Julian. "Gucky, please. We need you. Help us. Tell us what we can do for you in return. Besides, weren't you recently saying how bored you were in Terrania?"

Gucky leaned back, using his wide tail for support. His features relaxed, his eyes taking on an almond shape. "Oho, a deal! And the incentive of experiencing something. Nothing *too* exciting, but it's a

start, at least. I knew it. It's like with Sue. The females on this planet are just smarter. Better at tickling ears too."

"Racist," Julian grumbled.

Gucky cocked his head. "The females are a different race? Well, that explains a few things. Which was here first, then?"

"It's not like the chicken and the egg," Julian snapped.

"Is it not? And how is it with the chicken and the egg? Do they both go into the pan?"

"He's trying to take us for fools, Mildred! Let's go. This discount Mickey Mouse couldn't save anyone, let alone the universe."

"Wait!" Mildred took another step closer to Gucky and went to her knees so she could face him at eye level. "The Lakeside Institute isn't where you want to be long-term, right? You feel trapped here —I can see it in you. Let's do something truly good together and have an adventure in the process. Our plans are in the car. Come with us, then we can—"

"Come with you?" Gucky interrupted. "What a load of rot. If anyone's coming with anyone, *you're* coming with *me*."

The Mousebeaver took first her hand, then Julian's. Mildred hardly grasped what was happening. From one moment to the next, the dark room in the Lakeside Institute faded away.

Once Gucky's mind was made up, a series of frenzied jumps followed. The first actually took Mildred and Julian straight back to the off-road vehicle they'd left in the desert, where Julian quickly threw a few things into his backpack before they left the car behind. Their equipment included a wide robe with a pointed hat, like the rice farmers in some regions of China wore during the harvest. Mildred had bought both from a woman in Terrania. Disguised like that, Gucky didn't stand out at first glance, as long as he kept his head bowed. He looked like a child from a farming family.

Gucky took them onward, straight across the country to Beijing

Capital International Airport. Along the way, his para-gift of reading thoughts proved decidedly useful for spying on people. It gave the Mousebeaver a precise idea of when and where to jump within confined spaces. They had as little visual contact with other people as possible.

To be on the safe side, they initially chose bathrooms for the jumps so that no one would see them. The smells and sights proved a real challenge for Mildred's stomach. She was grateful to have a chance to go to the counter at a travel agency to ask about available tickets on departing American airplanes.

Her research didn't take long. Mildred wrote down the numbers of the unoccupied seats. Then the three of them materialized in the tiny airplane toilet on a not-fully-booked Delta Air Lines flight to Seattle-Tacoma. Gucky jumped again, taking himself into the cargo hold. He wasn't thrilled about the idea, but in the cramped airplane, he would have attracted attention too easily. Mildred and Julian, however, confidently blended in among the other passengers.

At first, Mildred feared being discovered, but they didn't stand out. The flight attendants assumed they'd checked in normally like everyone else, providing them with dinner, breakfast, and drinks in a routine manner. Since the passengers had boarded using two entrances, no one thought anything of it. They'd consciously chosen an overnight flight, as it meant they could leave their cabin lights turned off and spend most of the time sleeping. Beyond that, they avoided speaking.

In Seattle, the euphoric tumult around them made it a piece of cake to disappear. Gucky wanted their first stop to be an airport bathroom in the arrivals area, but Julian decided they should teleport directly to another plane so they weren't recorded on any surveillance cameras.

"Are we taking another flight?" Julian asked at a bus station a few hundred meters from the airport terminal.

Mildred noticed two passersby staring with curiosity at the Ilt in foreign clothing. She hurriedly ushered them behind a concrete wall that hid them from prying eyes.

Gucky stretched. “No. That won’t be necessary. William Tifflor was last seen in Washington, so we’ll work our way from west to east.”

They agreed with Gucky’s plan and embarked on a teleportation odyssey across the land, starting in Seattle. Mildred was slightly regretful not to be able to stay longer there. Even if she’d turned her back on her hometown, she still felt a tie to it. But there was no time for that. They didn’t know when people would start looking for the Ilt in Terrania. Gucky wasn’t a prisoner, but his disappearance would raise more than a few eyebrows.

They never stayed in one place for long. Mildred’s admiration for Gucky’s skills grew to stratospheric heights. Without a doubt, the Ilt was a teleporter like no other. Sure, he had to take breaks now and then, but within just two days, they’d reached the middle of the United States for free and without causing any commotion.

Their next stop led them to a gas station at the side of a freeway with a motel and fast food restaurant. This time, however, they didn’t go any farther.

Julian looked around, bewildered. “What are we doing in this dump?”

“Eating lunch,” the Ilt replied bluntly. “I want those yellow sticks dripping with fat that come from Middle America.”

Julian furrowed his brow in bafflement. “French fries? Those come from Belgium.”

“Middle America,” Gucky insisted. “1493. They were called potatoes back then. What did you do in school, just fetch chalk?”

Mildred grinned to herself. “You need fuel, right? Teleporting really takes it out of you.” She had the impression the already-slim Ilt had lost weight in the last two days.

Gucky’s silence was answer enough. The Mousebeaver waddled over to the electric door.

“Wait!” Julian said, holding him by a tuft of hair on his neck.

“You can’t just go in like that!” The venomous look Gucky shot him was enough for Julian to hastily release his grasp.

“What do you mean, ‘like that’?” Gucky asked, imitating Julian’s tone. He lifted his Chinese hat. “Is my hairdo out of fashion in this part of the galaxy?”

“You know what he means.” Mildred used the entreating gaze that had worked earlier when the alien and Julian had been at each other’s throats. She was sure a kindhearted being lurked behind the Ilt’s surly exterior. “We can pick up the fries for you.”

Gucky looked dubious. Clearly, his trust didn’t extend far enough to entrust her and Julian with something as valuable as French fries. “Is there any other option?”

“Sure,” Julian said in a pleasant tone. “Take off the robe and get on all fours. Then we can pretend you’re a mongrel dog. Or a factory accident.”

Gucky’s nose hairs twitched. His gaze was dripping with contempt. “Fine. I’ll wait behind that bush.” He pointed to a collection of rhododendrons at the edge of Interstate 74. “Just be quick about it.” He waddled off, straddle-legged.

Mildred looked toward the street with some worry, but none of the cars stopped. The longer they journeyed, the less cautious Gucky seemed to her. So far, luck had saved them more than common sense. “Hopefully, he won’t attract any attention.”

“I think he’s pretty worn out. We’ve gone hundreds of kilometers.” Julian gestured at a road sign with a number of miles written on it. “We’re in Peoria already. The middle of Illinois! I’ve got a decent amount of money in my account, and thanks to Mercant, I can access it. Let’s suggest to Gucky that we rent a car.”

Mildred eyed Julian critically. What was her boyfriend getting at? “Why are you telling me this and not him?”

Julian’s gaze turned pleading. “Because you have a better rapport with him. We’ve been traveling the country for nearly three

days and we've barely spoken with him. What do we know about him, really? Maybe he'll go apeshit and start choking us if I doubt his powers."

"You have the wrong idea about him. Gucky's good at heart."

"To you, maybe."

Mildred put her hands on her hips. She sensed anger rising up in her. "He's still helping you, isn't he? What more do you want? So far, he's exceeded all your expectations and then some."

Julian hung his head, ashamed. "You're right. I know you are. Just...I find him kind of scary is all."

Mildred relaxed. "All right. I'll talk to him. Rustling up a car shouldn't be too much trouble. It'll be better to have one in Washington anyway." She thought about the masses of people waltzing through the nation's capital. They'd been lucky in Beijing, but they also hadn't been trying to conduct an investigation there. In Washington, they'd have to do more than simply hide away.

Julian pulled himself together. "You're the best, Mildred."

Julian drove the rental car, a two-year-old Ford Travia Deluxe, while Mildred sat in the back seat with Gucky—an arrangement that irritated Julian. Gucky had insisted on it. Mildred was fairly sure the Ilt was having fun provoking Julian on purpose but that he didn't mean anything truly bad by it.

The Mousebeaver lay stretched out, his eyes open, and had her tickle his ears. He'd taken off the robe, which he'd found pretty uncomfortable, and the hat as well. His head rested on Mildred's lap like on a cushion. Every once in a while, he made a mocking remark about one of the street signs. Astonishingly, he seemed able to read English perfectly. This was quite a surprise to Mildred.

"How did you learn it? From humans' minds?"

"What would an Ilt be without a few mysteries?" Gucky squeaked, rubbing his head against her leg. As he did so, he glanced

innocently into the rear-view mirror—at Julian.

"You have way more mysteries than answers," Julian grumbled from the front, meeting the Ilt's gaze and then quickly looking at Mildred as if to reassure himself that she was okay with the Ilt's head on her lap.

"I'm not the only one," the Ilt retorted, sounding surprisingly friendly. "Now that I don't have to concentrate on jumping around all over the place, I think it's high time you told me a little about your father, don't you think?"

Julian's voice sounded wary. "Can't you read it all from my thoughts?"

"Only if you think about him. So far, all I've picked up is white noise and a whole bunch of whining. Tell me everything you know about your father's whereabouts. Did he have enemies?"

Julian's eyebrows knitted together, but then he relaxed his features, took a brief look at Mildred in the rear-view mirror, and began to explain. "My father defended the Arkonide Crest da Zoltral in the Supreme Court. He's one of the top lawyers in the United States. His fees are in the tens of millions. At the same time, ever since I can remember, he's been an advocate for people who couldn't afford *any* lawyer. I'm pretty sure he made a ton of enemies by defending Crest in this show trial, set up by Drummond. I can well imagine someone who's dead-set against the Arkonides being behind it."

While Julian continued explaining at length, Mildred looked out the window. Since starting their drive, they'd been listening to regional online radio. They'd been following news about their homeland online back in Terrania too. Following Drummond's inglorious end, the United States had fallen apart into two camps. Those who were "pro-Rhodan" welcomed Terraria and the new era with open arms, more than ready for humanity's venture to the stars. To them, Perry Rhodan was a hero. One to follow and support.

The "anti-Rhodan" adherents wanted everything to stay the way

it was and for America to maintain its supremacy in the world's power structure. They saw Rhodan's actions in the Gobi as treason. In their view, Crest and the Arkonide technology should belong to the American nation.

Violent confrontations worthy of the term "civil war" had taken place, and the country had been further ravaged by the raids of the Besun-hunting Fantan. Mildred saw it outside. They drove over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and started approaching Washington from the east, passing images of destruction. It was comforting to feel Gucky's warm body beneath her fingers, as the more Mildred caught sight of, the more she was affected.

While fall was still yet to come in the natural world, it appeared to have fully conquered civilization. America was in decay. Until now, their journey had only shown them a few barricaded windows that could have been due to a hurricane, but now they were seeing bullet holes and severe damage. Many buildings were daubed with slogans in red and brown, with glass and rubble lying on the street. To the melancholy music of Melware, who were playing on the radio in the background, a world spread before Mildred that didn't seem to be hers anymore. This wasn't the America she'd grown up in, but something different, alien.

This is the payoff of every crackpot being allowed a gun, she thought. *And everyone being able to read up online about how to make bombs or explosives.*

She knew her thoughts were only partly accurate. In some cases, the army troops had defected to one of the camps or been overpowered because they didn't want to shoot at their own population. That put more weapons into circulation. Violent confrontations had arisen between members of the two factions. Like in a religious war, fanaticism had flared up, making the violence escalate on both sides. One had stylized Crest into the devil, the other into the son of God and a savior. Luckily, the battles were over by now; the pro-Rhodan faction had won, and peace mostly reigned. Only here and there did the conflict spark to life on a smaller scale, claiming further victims.

In Mildred's memory, the same scenes appeared that had been

spread around the world. Drummond and a remnant of loyal military and police units had escaped from the rebels and entrenched themselves in the White House. The snapshots in time flashed by like a highlight reel. The attack, the shootout, and the wide face of Aylin Kerson, the blonde woman who had shot Stanley Drummond in his attempt to flee into an armored car.

The new government had been set up in Philadelphia. It was a provisional body focused on ensuring peace for now and had, like the rest of Earth's governments, joined the newly founded Terran Union.

"What's that?" Julian asked, interrupting his own story along with Mildred's recollections.

Mildred turned her head to face the front, away from the depressing view of a burned-out mall and towards a roadblock. On the slightly downward-sloping section of road, signs demanded they decelerate to walking speed. Only one lane was open. Two armed police officers were standing next to a parked patrol car, waving cars towards them. A surveillance camera registered the cars driving through.

Nervously, Mildred looked at Gucky. Would the Ilt pass as an animal?

So far on their journey, only passersby had seen Gucky. Mildred, Julian, and the Ilt had made an effort to avoid standing out, moving on from each location as quickly as possible. Twice, people had tried to snap a photo of Gucky with a pod, but the Ilt had been faster both times and had telekinetically pushed the device aside. This was the first time they'd been confronted with a police check. If the officers realized there was an alien in the car, they'd set off a media storm that would likely hinder Julian's search for his father. In an emergency, they could teleport away, of course, but if Gucky was exposed and photos of him were on the Ever-Net, every subsequent step would be difficult, if not impossible.

They're only looking in every second car. Maybe we'll be lucky.

"I *knew* it," Julian spat as one of the officers waved them over.

“We’re already on camera, I bet.”

“We’ll get through safely,” Mildred said confidently. “We will.” Thanks to Mercant, they could provide ID. The former secret service agent had arranged fake passports for them, which would stand up to any scrutiny thanks to the means at Terrania’s disposal. Mercant knew from personal experience what it meant when a person went off the grid, and he hadn’t hesitated to help Julian and Mildred.

“Don’t say a word, Gucky,” Julian implored the Mousebeaver, and drove up alongside the man as requested, a short distance away from the patrol car.

The officer who had waved them over came straight to them. He was sporty, blond, and tall. The first signs of wrinkles had formed around his green eyes, a typical former football player who might have been a star on the field in high school but was now getting on in years and had a little more fat around his waist too. With a friendly smile, he bent down to Julian and knocked on the window.

Julian slid the glass down. Mildred held her breath.

“ID please,” the man buzzed.

Julian held them out with a charming smile. The officer accepted the two chip cards, took a quick look at Mildred, then asked, “So, where you headed, Jester Polan?”

Julian reacted promptly to the name. “Washington. Just to take a look.”

The blond man tilted his head. “Disaster tourists, huh? We get a lot of those. It’ll be a while before Washington looks the way it used to.” He stood up straight again, seeming satisfied.

Mildred was about to exhale in relief when the officer suddenly bent down in her direction. He pointed to Gucky, who had gotten himself into a sleeping position in the back seat. “Oh man. What the hell kind of mongrel mutt is that?”

From Julian’s blank stare, Mildred knew she had to act fast. If she didn’t reply, they’d look suspicious. “It’s an Il…an Ilz,” she

hastily corrected herself.

Since arriving from the Vega system with Rhodan, Gucky had lived in the secluded Lakeside Institute. Still, she didn't know if rumors of his existence had spread through the media despite this. When she noticed the police officer's dubious gaze, she fled into the playacted arrogance of a proud dog owner. "And he's not a *mongrel mutt*, by the way, but a thoroughbred that comes from Switzerland, like the Entlebucher. Its home region is the Mösli Kanton. Some also call them the Noble Ilz due to their aristocratic nature and origins in hunting dog breeds of the Swiss nobility."

"What a world," the officer marveled. "But he's still an ugly little fella. Can he even bite with that one tooth?"

Julian leaned out of the window, forced cheerfulness marking his voice. "Careful what you say, or he might bite *you*."

The officer paid Julian no mind. Instead, he turned to his colleague, who was standing five meters away by the patrol car, waving a car through. "Hey, Walt, come over here. You gotta see this! These disaster tourists have the ugliest pooch I ever seen in the back seat!"

Mildred cast a worried look at Gucky. The Ilt stretched out on her lap and squinted at the policeman. A dangerous gleam appeared in his eyes.

Walt did as his colleague asked, coming over and pressing his head against the rear window to gawk at Gucky. "Is that thing a factory reject or what?"

Mildred and Julian exchanged concerned glances. Mildred felt almost paralyzed. She could sense Gucky's growing anger. His muscles were twitching slightly beneath her hand. What if the Ilt lost his nerve and snapped at the officers?

"Can we go now?" she asked tersely, acting offended.

The men laughed.

"Your car!" Julian exclaimed from the front.

Mildred looked at the police car, which had slowly started to move. As if in slow motion, it rolled down the slight incline and past the rental car.

“Walt! You forgot the handbrake!”

“No I didn’t!”

The pair ran after the car, which didn’t accelerate continuously despite the downhill force, instead jolting forward before the officers could catch it.

Mildred stared at Gucky. “Are you doing that?”

The Ilt didn’t answer.

Outside, the officers reached their car and wrenched open both doors. But before they could jump in, the belts holding up their pants came undone. The pant legs slid down, revealing two very different pairs of underwear. Walt’s had a Superman logo, while his colleague wore tighty-whities. Both men stumbled, yanked up their pants, and swore. Walt didn’t manage to catch himself, falling and tumbling before finally getting to his feet, rather the worse for wear. The cars alongside them were driving ever more slowly; windows were opened. Walt and his colleague performed a wild dance as they tried to buckle themselves up without the car getting away.

Julian laughed. “Now that is cool! What a show!”

“Julian,” Mildred chided him, seeing a serious accident about to happen at any moment. The car was rolling on at a steady pace with open doors, drifting closer and closer to their lane. Horns were being honked, and a large truck had to swerve. Then the police car came to a stop mid-slope. The two officers caught up and practically went for each other’s throats, still holding up their pants. Clearly, each blamed the other for this strange occurrence.

Gucky’s eyes narrowed. “If they come close again, I’ll send the patrol car flying and land it right on their arrogant asses.”

“Step on it!” Mildred urged. She couldn’t hold back a grin.

Julian accelerated and slowly drove past the arguing policemen. Mildred was happy to soon see the uniformed figures shrinking in the distance behind them.

3.

Rubble World

Zardik

September 15, 2036

Rhodan stepped with confidence into the transmitter arch, joining Thora. Ideally, he'd have wanted to send the robot through without them. However, despite all its technical wizardry, PROTO was not a human and (unlike Lossoshér) couldn't operate the transmitter for a return trip. The only compromise remaining to Rhodan had been for the robot to go first so that it could give them an initial report as soon as they followed.

Only after PROTO had spent a solid ten minutes on the other side did Rhodan give Lossoshér the signal to follow the robot. The transmitter guardian activated the device. Bright light flared up in the archway. A radiation field formed on the platform. The intangible blackness among the brightness made Rhodan nervous.

Sue had grasped Bull's hand; Tschubai, Chaktor, and Lossoshér were standing close together.

Rhodan gulped. His mind could still hardly make sense of this miraculous technology. De- and rematerialization without being destroyed. That was more than he could even imagine. Who had built these masterpieces? What had they looked like, and where had they gone after installing their transport system everywhere under the blue sun? Even the Ferrons didn't know. Rhodan wished he could meet one of these beings to ask the thousands of questions he had about the transmitters.

"Here goes," Bull said softly.

Lossoshér activated another switch. A soft humming sounded. The black field expanded, encompassing and devouring them.

Although Rhodan knew from his own experience that the transmitter passage left no detectable effects on the body, he felt a queasy feeling in his stomach. When the feeling subsided, he blinked. The transfer was already complete, quick as a flash and so inexplicably that he didn't want to keep thinking about it. No attempts at understanding this marvel would get him anywhere. Other questions were more pressing.

Where are we?

"A basement," he discerned. "At least, the room doesn't have any windows." He stepped into the barren concrete space. Apart from the arch-shaped receiving transmitter, there was nothing to see. Bare walls, naked floor, lit by the pale blue glow of the transmitter lighting.

Thora hesitated. "Do we already have an indication of which celestial body we're on?"

Lossoshér went over to the controls. His bony fingers lovingly ran along them as if stroking a cat. "I can't see anything. The functions are locked. All I *can* say is that the gravity's almost identical to that on Zardik." He sounded disappointed. "Maybe we're still on the same moon, just on the other side."

"PROTO?" Rhodan called to the robot over the com link. "What data have you collected?"

"There are no people present in the direct vicinity," the robot said with a wonderfully modulated female voice.

Rhodan shuddered. *So that's what death sounds like to the Arkonides.* The combat robot had already had the female voice before they'd retooled it.

PROTO continued its report. "Radiation levels are slightly increased. Direct sources of danger cannot be ruled out. No assailants in a radius of two hundred meters. Arkonide suit impulses could not be detected. As such, there are no signs of Crest da Zoltral and his companions. However, I have found an exit. Shall I transmit its location?"

“Please.” Rhodan saw Thora’s disappointed face. She’d hoped for a trace of Crest, even though the chances were slim that they’d hit upon suit impulses right next to the transmitter. He looked at the rendering on the hand-sized pod integrated into the protective suit over the wrist and forearm. This additional upgrade provided an interface with PROTO. A cutaway view of the building had appeared before his eyes. At the end of the room, a corridor led into a tight tunnel, then to a staircase and outside. “Let’s go. PROTO, leave the building first and collect further data.”

The robot rolled forward, making easy work of negotiating the stairs without even activating its flight mode.

Rhodan took in the readings on the Arkonide suit’s display. “The atmosphere has changed significantly. I don’t think we’re still on Zardik. At a glance, the air composition is almost identical to Earth’s. We won’t be needing oxygen masks for the foreseeable future.”

“Let’s find out.” Thora followed the robot.

Rhodan was worried about her. He much preferred the prudent, cautious Thora, even if she’d always had a tendency toward impulsive acts. With an uneasy feeling, he remembered when Thora had covered the *Stardust*’s Chinese besiegers in beam fire in the Gobi.

He nodded to the others and caught up to her. Together, they climbed the staircase. The suits’ dim light illuminated their ascent. At the top, a closed metal door awaited them, built into a concrete wall.

Lossoshér touched a switch and the metal silently sank and opened the way. They stepped through, one after another. A gray drizzle blew towards them, blotting their visors. Rhodan gazed out at a rubble landscape that made him involuntarily stop and stare. It smelled of fire and refuse.

“What on earth happened here?” Sue whispered, aghast.

“This needs one heck of a cleanup crew,” Bull remarked, but it

sounded neither mocking nor sarcastic. The voice of Rhodan's friend broke off. The sight seemed to have made his throat close up.

A shiver ran down Rhodan's spine. They were standing in the middle of a ruined street. Concrete buildings surrounded them, though they could barely be called that anymore. Even the one they'd come out of was a wreck. The dull-looking metal door stood proudly in what was the only complete wall still standing. The inner room with the corridor had been intact, but the outer facade looked as though titans had carelessly torn it away.

"The war against the Topisdans," Chaktor murmured. "This area must have fallen victim to the invasion fleet, and they couldn't rebuild it yet. There are regions where all the residents have just left."

A low rumbling from the distance took all of Rhodan's attention. At the same moment, PROTO got in touch over the helmet com. "I'm detecting weapon noises. Combat operations approximately five hundred meters away."

"Back to the transmitter!" Rhodan spun around. He watched as the Arkonide battledresses automatically activated their stealth functions in response to the warning. In front of him, Sue and Bull melded into the gray of the street for a moment; then his suits' internal functions caught up and they both became visible to him, though enemies wouldn't have been able to make them out.

"Wait!" Thora grabbed him by the shoulder. "The war in the Vega system is over. If this is anything, it's an army training exercise in an abandoned area. There's no other invasion, right, Chaktor?"

The Ferron raised his hands in an indeterminate gesture. "Correct. I also can't imagine we've left the Vega system. The building style looks like it belongs to my people, though it is quite outdated. Maybe that sound comes from one of the Fkanftas, our peace celebrations. After the Topsidans pulled out, they were happening all over the place, and they're still being held in places."

Bull addressed the robot for all to hear. "PROTO, was the data

collected on the basis of acoustic values?"

"It was indeed," PROTO answered, sounding so human that Rhodan had an entirely different picture in his mind than this machine made of plastic and metal.

He wavered, then said, "All right. Let's go on a little way. We can climb up over there and look in the direction the sound is coming from." He pointed to a hill made of rubble.

Thora took the lead. The others followed the Arkonide at a measured pace.

Rhodan couldn't take his eyes off the devastated buildings. Everything around them spoke of war and conflict. Missiles had rampaged, guns had torn ugly holes, air raids had bombed whole streets out of existence. There were no signs of life anywhere. He didn't even see a single rat or carrion-eater. The image lay before him like a dead landscape, gray upon gray. Only on the far horizon did a green area shimmer through the rain. Mountains towered, their snow-capped peaks melting into heavy clouds.

The sky's color let Rhodan assume they were indeed still in the Vega system. The blue sun gave the whole system an entirely unique tinge that was still faintly present even through the rain. It had to be sunrise or sunset at the moment. Unfortunately, Vega itself wasn't visible behind the haze.

Rhodan reached the large pile of rubble. His gaze fell on a blue doll lying amid melted plastic. Its limbs were twisted, its head half torn off. Where was the child it belonged to? *Hopefully far away in safety with family, experiencing better times.*

He sought purchase on a particularly wide chunk of stone and activated his battledress's receiver. Startled, he furrowed his brow. Nothing. No radio, no television. What was that supposed to mean?

The blue doll was a sign that they were around Ferron civilization. Why wasn't the suit picking up any of the known networks? Were they on one of the many far-flung moons that were barely settled?

He intensified the search. A weak com signal was found, but it was encrypted. Pondering the situation, Rhodan looked at the asphalt-like ground between two large pieces of debris. The color struck him as unusual, rust red like dried blood. He'd never noticed ground like this on any world in the Vega system. It looked alien.

"Perry!" Bull waved at him, agitated. He was pointing down from the rubble hill towards a burning building on the devastated outskirts. Thick smoke was rising up into the twilight. "It's still burning down there. Tell me *that's* a victory celebration."

Rhodan caught on immediately. "Back to the transmitter!" he ordered. "We know too little about what's going on. We need more information and a plan."

Thora's voice held a pleading tone. "But we at least have to look for Crest before—"

PROTO interrupted her. "Guided missile in flight. Further data is being transmitted to your suits. I will take the liberty of externally activating and synchronizing your defensive shields."

"What is that?" came the mystified voice of Ras Tschubai almost at the same moment. His finger was pointing into the sky. Beneath the cloud covering, a dark point was barreling towards them.

"Take cover!" Rhodan ran to Lossoshér, who was least confident with the Arkonide suits' workings. He grabbed the elderly man by the arm and pulled him along. The activated synchronization made both shields merge into a large one, allowing Rhodan to support the Ferron.

Thora and Bull got moving too. They turned back toward the transmitter. Sue, who had stayed the farthest back, got to the building first. She was less than twenty meters away when the missile struck right in front of her with an infernal crash.

Blue flames exploded; chunks of earth and stone flew into the air; concrete sprayed everywhere. Screaming, Sue threw herself to the ground. She was lying in the middle of an inferno. Her shield had protected her, but she wasn't giving the Positronic any clear

commands anymore.

"Sue! Get away from there!" A thought ran through Rhodan's mind. *The shields aren't designed for an ongoing barrage like that. After thirty minutes, if not sooner, they break down. The longer Sue lies there, the riskier it is.*

Even as he thought that, he was already acting. "Positronic, get Sue Mirafiore out of the danger zone! Rank override!"

Sue rose as if lifted up by an invisible hand and flew over to him. An unnerving sound shot through his skull, mixing with the others' voices.

"Oh, crap, that's the poisonous substance alarm!" Bull cried, drowning out Thora's Arkonide tirade and Lossoshér's stammering.

"Danger! Further missiles inbound!" PROTO reported.

Rhodan saw the target coordinates on his arm display. All the projectiles were flying in the direction of the transmitter. That couldn't be a coincidence. Someone had noticed their presence and located them, presumably. Had the transmitter's activation been detected?

"Dodge left!" He dragged Lossoshér with him and saw Thora, Tschubai, and Chaktor rising into the air. A second guided missile detonated at close range. Fire and smoke spread.

Rhodan's ears were ringing. His heart was racing as quickly as his thoughts. What had they gotten themselves into? Was there a new war in the Ferron realm? Had the Topsidans come back? Breathless, he looked at the readings on the Arkonide battledress. Without the suits and their defensive shields, they'd have been dead. He could almost taste a metallic bitterness in his mouth, although such an injury was impossible through the suit.

A renewed thunder blared. The building they'd come out of burst into pieces. Bluish white flames blazed up in front of Rhodan. Black smoke ascended and blew towards him. A cold hand grasped at his heart.

“The transmitter!” Lossoshér struggled against Rhodan’s grasp. He was trying to go back, closer to the target of the attacks. By now, they’d gained a distance of two hundred meters.

“Leave it!” Rhodan barked at Lossoshér. “We can’t go back there!”

Lossoshér didn’t listen to him. With the might of the Arkonide suit, he fought against the direction Rhodan was moving in.

“Ras! Thora!”

Those two were the closest and came over straight away. Their shields merged together, and as a team, they held Lossoshér in place until he calmed down.

Next to them, Rhodan saw Bull take Sue with him, their shields fused together as well.

“What the hell’s going on?” Bull’s voice sounded flabbergasted. “Perry, what kind of damn war is this?”

“I don’t know,” Rhodan admitted.

He felt paralyzed. As they flew, he looked back. The transmitter wasn’t standing anymore. No matter how much he scanned the smoking surface, all he could make out was a crater. It gaped open at exactly the spot where they’d entered this hostile world.

Sue Mirafiore

Sue pressed her hands against her helmet. She didn’t want to see or hear anything anymore. She was miserable. Just like back in Houston when the police had opened fire on the Pain Shelter. John Marshall, who was like a father to her, had tried to mediate and almost paid for his good intentions with his life.

Three missiles detonated right up close to them, then silence fell for a moment, as if fate were drawing a breath before sending the next catastrophe.

“Enemy contact,” PROTO reported before raising one of its arms and shooting a fast-approaching object not far from the ground. A triangular craft was flying towards them, deadly projectiles blasting from two tubes at its sides. In a panic, Sue dodged out of the way. After two further blasts missed their targets, the vehicle turned away.

“Reg, how come they can see us? I thought the suits made us invisible!”

“The rain!” Bull spat the words like a curse. “Maybe there’s something in the water or it’s to do with the light. Take a look at the others.”

Only a few meters on, Sue realized what Bull meant. Tschubai’s shield was shimmering under the water droplets like a pastel rainbow. The glow of their protective coverings was making them all into targets.

The aircraft turned, rattling horribly. Muzzle flashes sparked. Bull pulled Sue towards him. He changed his direction of flight, accelerating rapidly and taking her with him. Sue trembled; she couldn’t fight the impulse to press her helmet against his shoulder.

The aircraft and the robot shot at one another until the triangular vehicle crashed more than landed. Sue heard Rhodan say something over the com link, but she couldn’t concentrate on the words. Her thoughts raced. *We’re in the middle of a battle. Enemies are coming. We’ll be dead soon.*

Blue-skinned forms in gray uniforms jumped out of the craft. At the same time, more of them approached along the bombed-out streets. They aimed at Sue and Bull, who were floating at least four meters above the ground, but their shots didn’t hit home. PROTO threw itself in the way. Bull howled as the robot exploded in a volley of gunfire.

Fearful, Sue closed her eyes. Further shots hit the defensive shield with loud impacts. She knew that the readings were already in the critical range. The Arkonide technology wasn’t built to withstand such a constant barrage. So far, it had compensated well

for poison, heat, and shockwaves. Now, an intrusive alarm signal sounded that quickly fell silent.

Sue heard Bull's voice. "Our shield is giving up the ghost, Perry. It won't make it much longer. We need cover!"

Bull brought them safely to the ground, landing in an indent between several pieces of rubble. Silence fell over the street.

Wide-eyed, Sue stared at the scraps of PROTO raining through the air like confetti. Smoke rose up.

"Oh no," said Bull, the words escaping his mouth like a moan.

"Who are they?" Sue whispered.

"Ferrons," Rhodan said firmly through the com channel. He sounded like he was standing right next to her, although he was in a pit at least four meters away. "We have to negotiate with them. Escaping in flight mode isn't possible. The suits are overloaded. Any more gunfire and the shields will break down."

The soldiers drew closer. Sue couldn't help noticing how mismatched all their camouflage suits and equipment looked. Some pieces were chunky and solid, others heavily used and clearly older. Most of the soldiers had helmets with dents, nicks, and scratches. Almost all their uniforms had signs of damage.

"The transmitter..." Lossoshér lamented. "We're lost."

Frantically, Sue turned to look at the building. The concrete ruins weren't there anymore. Next to the street, the blue fire of devastation still raged. But wasn't that the least of their problems right now? The combat robot had been destroyed. Only the suits and their nearly broken shields were keeping them from certain death.

"What if they don't want to negotiate?" Thora asked. Her voice sounded cold and collected. Sue admired the Arkonide's calmness. "They purposely bombarded the position we appeared without even trying to make contact."

“No time for talking,” Chaktor contributed. “They’re on the march.”

Sue watched the circle around them grow tighter. A loud cry rang out over the smoking ruins. The translator provided no indication of what it meant. Whatever had been bellowed there couldn’t have been in the Ferron language, since that was stored in the device. The Positronic needed time to compile data. Where exactly had they emerged? Hell?

She reached for the weapon at her side. She’d never expected to need it, but her hand cramped around the Arkonide beamer. She didn’t want to fight, and definitely not against Ferrons. But what other choice did she have?

Perry Rhodan

Rhodan emerged from his cover and held his hands above his head. As if to confirm Thora's assertion, the first shots hailed towards them. His defensive shield caught them. Looking at the rising stress curve, he felt worried. He wished Tschubai could teleport them all somewhere else. But where? And that was aside from the fact that they were too large a group to be saved by the teleporter all in one go. There was only one option, and this was it.

"We want to negotiate!" Rhodan called out through his suit's external speaker.

There was no change in their reaction. Further shots rained against his shield. The Ferrons screamed incomprehensible orders at him. Cursing, he retreated back behind cover. As he did, he could almost *feel* the translator working. Under his skin, it felt unnervingly warm in the back of his neck.

"Come on, Perry, we have to fight back!" Bull said, crawling over to him. "They'll overcome us in no time."

"My suit's done for," Tschubai reported quietly. "One more direct hit and my defensive shield will break."

Thora and Chaktor took the decision away from them. Both returned fire. Rhodan set his beamer to stun and fired as well. Only Lossoshér and Sue stayed hidden.

I just don't understand it. Rhodan was annoyed at his own ignorance. *What part of the Vega system is this? Where is there this kind of heavy combat?*

The aliens attacked again and bellowed something. Gradually, the translator formed words out of it that Rhodan could understand. "Surrender! All of you come out at once!"

In front of them, Ras screamed out. He fell onto the lacerated asphalt and lay there, twitching.

“Ras!” Bull cried into the chaos over the helmet com channel.

“Quiet!” Rhodan thundered. “We’ll give ourselves up during the next break in their fire. All at the same time, we’ll stand and put our hands up. *Then* we’ll check on Ras.”

As anticipated, a moment of silence came. Rhodan got up first and the others followed his lead. This time, no one shot at them.

“Drop your weapons!” demanded a lanky Ferron—the one standing closest. Behind the helmet visor, Rhodan could recognize dark blue skin and a bright yellow cloth the soldier wore tied around his forehead like a ninja warrior.

“Do as he says!” Anxiously, Rhodan glanced over at Tschubai. He wished he could have run over. It looked like his friend had been hit in the leg. He was rolling around on the ground, groaning, his hands pressed against the wound.

Everyone but Thora responded, letting their beamers fall.

“Thora!” Internally, Rhodan pleaded for her not to do anything stupid. “Ras’s shield is down, and one more blow could spell the same for Reg and Sue! Do you want to sacrifice all three of them?”

Thora wavered, then slowly let the weapon drop. Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief.

The strange Ferrons stepped closer. “There we go,” the translator conveyed after a brief pause. Why did the device have to pause at all? Was the alien speaking with a strong accent, or did the tech still have some growing pains? With a shudder, Rhodan touched the suit above his neck.

The soldier lowered his weapon too. “Let’s negotiate. Deactivate your protective fields!”

Rhodan exchanged a glance with Bull and complied. They were at too big a disadvantage. If they didn’t obey, the soldiers would soon render the shields useless anyway.

“I want to see to my friend,” Rhodan calmly requested. Through

his opponent's visor, he saw copper-colored eyes the same color as most Ferrons' hair.

The Ferron laughed harshly. "The one we hit? He's already construction material for the towers." He walked over to Tschubai and stepped on his suit. Tschubai writhed.

Sue ran toward Tschubai. Rhodan was about to follow, but the men and women behind the one in the yellow bandana threw themselves forward, forcing Sue and the others to the ground. Rhodan tried to resist, but their superior force pushed him down.

"Take off their suits!" the yellow bandana Ferron ordered imperiously. "Perhaps they will appease Nerlan." He leaned down to Tschubai, opened the human's helmet, and yanked it off his head. Then he lowered his weapon to the temple of the teleporter, who was whimpering in pain.

"No!" Rhodan tried to stand up, but the guards held him in place. The more he struggled, the harder they forced him down. He swallowed dust and coughed.

The Ferron laughed at him! "Why the big fuss? He's dead meat. Pity about him. A good, strong man, and you rarely see skin like that." Slowly, he aimed, as if he wanted to hit a specific point on Tschubai's body.

"Spare yourself the bullet, Mar-Ton," a voice interjected. A Ferron woman stepped forward, scrutinizing Rhodan and his companions for a moment before coming to a stop next to the man with the yellow bandana. Her gray uniform featured an adornment on the stand-up collar. She was presumably a commander. "What kinds of suits are those? I don't recognize them."

"Something from another planet, maybe," someone behind them suggested.

"Let's kill them all, Sir-Lan Rukaar," Mar-Ton urged. "They're Gorchoos for certain."

Rhodan held his breath. *City rats,* shot an abrupt thought through

his head. *“Gorchoos” means something like city rats—a kind of animal.* He blinked as the translator’s unsolicited information distracted him from his fear.

The commander hesitated. “It’s too far out of the ordinary, Mar-Ton. Durhai Nerlan will decide himself.”

Durhai Nerlan

Durhai Nerlan stood stock-still in the tent, as was his way. Today, his skin was itching particularly unbearably. He could feel the pus-filled pimples leaking and sticking to the innermost layer of his clothing. The stench that arose when he undressed—he’d gotten used to it years ago. But he’d never block out the damned itching. His own skin was the greatest foe he had, and, as with any foe, he’d deployed everything he could to fight this unique battle. Ointments, tinctures, medicines for internal purification. He’d even let a faith healer take a look at him. All without any success. The tinctures gave him relief, granting a little respite. No more than that, however. And the faith healthier hadn’t managed to survive the injuries Nerlan had given him after his failure. He couldn’t have been *that* talented, in other words.

“Please, sir.” The blue-skinned woman was on her knees before him, tightly holding the hand of her twin brother, who was crouching beside her. “Please, you are so great and wise. You know why we had to risk this attack. We wanted to follow the ultimatum, but the others didn’t let us. Our escape attempt was the last hope before you marched in and made the city equal to the earth-ground.”

Nerland looked down at her. His right armpit was itching horribly. A sticky substance seemed to be burning itself into his pores. But he wouldn’t give that away by scratching at it. Not in front of the two prisoners, nor his own bodyguards, who stood like stone columns two meters away. He was Nerlan the Great, not Nerlan the Scratcher.

“I don’t like wasting resources,” Nerlan conceded. “Those are

precious. As such, I put a choice before you. Serve me or die."

The twins looked at each other. From above, Nerlan observed their full blue shocks of hair. He liked this hair. It was unusual.

Nerlan pulled out his projectile weapon. "What's the holdup? You know I'm not joking, don't you? I'm going to count to three. One." He paused a moment. "Two." The next pause was longer.

"Sir, we need more time..." the brother begged.

"Three." Nerlan pulled the trigger. An ugly bang resounded. The bullet from above bored into the blue-haired man's forehead. His sister screamed. Her time came quickly too. The second shot struck just as true as the first. Not even the least capable of his Dradesires could have missed at this range. But Nerlan prided himself on firing expert shots. He only pierced arteries. Sometimes his enemies plunged to the ground so quickly that it looked more like they'd run in fear.

"Shame," Nerlan murmured, putting the weapon away. The burning under his armpit grew even more intense. Maybe he should have tortured the blue-haired twins first. Watching others be flogged or beaten with Far rods made his skin immediately itch less. However, that would have meant breaking his own rules. That could cost him the respect of his guards. Once he started counting, he went through with the killing. Everyone who knew him knew that. *Consistency is the most important thing,* he thought with regret.

Slowly, he turned to his bodyguards Tarbil and Soot, at the tent entrance. "Take them away. And cut their hair off. We could still make some wigs out of them."

"As you wish, Durhai."

Nerlan watched, emotionless, as the guards grabbed the corpses and pulled them away. Only when his T-communicator made a shrill noise did he stir again. In one single motion, he pulled the device to his ear, noting who it was as he did so. "Rukaar? I hope you're not disturbing me without good reason."

4.

In Nerlan's Captivity

One Hour After the Transmitter Journey

The rain had stopped, but the air still felt cold and wet. Without a protective suit, Rhodan was at the mercy of the rough weather. In the soldiers' custody, several minutes passed between the ruins before the men and women around him snapped to attention and their soft conversations fell silent in an instant.

Rhodan couldn't help but blink. The fattest Ferron he'd ever seen was walking over to him. The blue-haired man wore a blue and white outfit with an old-fashioned-looking cut. He was almost as tall as Lossoshér and at least four times as wide around the waist as Chaktor. The speed with which he moved looked grotesque in view of his corpulence. His face and forearms were uncovered. His skin was swollen and scarred, with countless raised pocks forming more abscesses than pimples. A greenish yellow liquid clung to some of them, though it was dried out in places.

"I can tell from the look in your eyes that we're meeting now for the first time," the Ferron said dryly. "But perhaps you've heard of me? I am Nerlon the Great. Some also call me Nerlan the Ugly. Does that ring a bell?"

"I'm afraid not," Rhodan said curtly. He couldn't risk making something up that might put him in danger of immediate execution. So far, he didn't even know what planet or moon he was on. He carefully flexed his wrists, which were in plastic handcuffs. The Ferrons had bound the others' hands in front of their bodies as well. Ten soldiers in camouflage suits still surrounded them, led by Rukaar and Mar-Ton.

Rukaar stepped forward. "These are the ones, Durhai. Look at their weapons." She held Rhodan's Arkonide beamer out to Nerlan.

Nerlan examined it thoroughly. "Have the weapons and suits

brought to my lab. We'll see what we can make of them." The corpulent Ferron turned to Rhodan. The gaze from his deep-set eyes was piercing. Although his facial expression looked friendly, Rhodan remained on guard. Nerlon wasn't one to be toyed with; Rhodan's knowledge of human nature told him that. He recognized it not only from the unflinching way in which Nerlan carried himself, but also from the surrounding Ferrons, who acted submissively and avoided direct eye contact with their leader. There was no doubt that Nerlan was the one in charge and would punish anyone who disobeyed him.

"What's your name, milk-skin?" Nerlan asked casually, as if they were standing around chatting at a barbecue.

"Rhodan." Most Ferrons had only one name, so he left it at that.

"Rhodan," Nerlan pondered. His gaze swept across Sue, Thora, Bull, and Tschubai on the ground.

Tschubai wasn't stirring anymore. Rhodan feared the worst. However, he could only change the situation for the better if he stayed calm and suppressed his urge to storm over to Tschubai. He exchanged a brief glance with Chaktor, who was standing next to the paralyzed-looking Lossoshér. Chaktor would hold his nerve, but Lossoshér was another question altogether. The situation had overwhelmed the elderly Ferron. Next to Tschubai, Rhodan's biggest worries were about him and Thora.

"All right then, Rhodan." Nerlan's featured hinted at what could have been a smile or a snarl. "You and your friends have brought me some interesting equipment. You've also wounded a few of my people, and resources are scarce. As such, I present you with a choice. You can serve me as soldiers and fill the holes you've torn open, or you can die. I'll give you to the count of three, so decide quickly. One..."

"We'll serve you," Rhodan said before Nerlan had even fully pronounced the number. He noticed Thora's angry glare and ignored it. Dying wasn't an option.

Nerlan let out what sounded like a bark. He clapped Rhodan

hard on the shoulder. “No one’s ever been that quick before. Congratulations, Rhodan. Maybe you’ll even make it to a leadership position in my army.”

Next to them, Tschubai raised an arm and wheezed.

“Ras!” Sue ran over to the injured man, threw herself at him, and pressed her hands to his leg. Several projectile weapons were aimed at her. Even Nerlan raised a shimmering gray pistol with a short barrel. He aimed at the back of Sue’s head. His finger bent.

“No!” Rhodan pleaded. He didn’t care how desperate he sounded. If Sue died, he would never forgive himself. She was on this mission because he’d asked her. “Please. She’s only a child. Don’t shoot her!”

Nerlan lowered his weapon. “No. She’s too interesting for that.” He turned to Rukaar and the rest of his people. “Take the women to the command post. The men will go to the soldiers. And the big one there…” He pointed at Tschubai. “We’ll take him with us too. He’s something special.”

Without another word, Nerlan turned around and stomped away.

“Separate us?” Bull objected behind him. “Absolutely no way. You can’t—”

Rhodan cast a warning glance at his friend. “We can’t do anything about it for now,” he said quietly. “We need time.”

Weak blue light drew his attention. The cloud cover had been torn open by invisible winds. Vega stood clearly in the sky.

“Rofus,” Chaktor whispered next to him, stunned. “By all the star nebulae and the damned souls of Gol…this is Rofus. How can that be? We don’t have any war on—”

Rukaar punched Chaktor hard in the side. Chaktor groaned in anguish.

“Get moving,” the commander ordered. “And no whining. Give us any trouble and you’ll end up in the towers after all.”

Rhodan wondered what was up with these “towers.” Mar-Ton had mentioned them, and now Rukaar had too. Were they some kind of burial site?

Slowly, he started walking. Though he had keenly felt the danger while in Nerlan’s presence, he now felt he had a little breathing room. He had to use the journey through the ruined city to gather some information. That was the only way to reunite the group as quickly as possible and make their escape. He would keep in mind that Nerlan had ordered his friends to the command post. It had to be possible to find them. Hopefully Sue would be able to help Tschubai. Maybe her brief, courageous effort had already set him on the path to recovery.

In the distance, Rhodan saw smoke rising up. He couldn’t help thinking of Crest, Michalovna, and Trker-Hon. They couldn’t have survived on this hostile world. Or had they also become Nerlan’s soldiers? Surely not Trker-Hon. A Topsidan had to be too alien to the Ferrons for them to spare his life in a war like this.

He breathed in deeply and concentrated entirely on the present. Without knowledge, he’d get nowhere. He tried starting a conversation. “We’re Nerlan’s soldiers now. Who are we fighting against?”

“A joker, huh?” Mar-Ton scoffed. “You must know *that* at least. You came from the city, after all.” Mar-Ton gestured at a row of destroyed buildings.

With a little imagination, Rhodan could picture it as a modern suburb with elaborate public transport routes, stations, shopping facilities, and plenty of residential blocks. All of it lay in ruins. Some buildings could only be guessed at from their outlines.

Pondering how to continue the conversation in a meaningful way, he looked to Chaktor, Bull, and Lossoshér for help. He couldn’t expect any support from them, however. Chaktor was staring at Vega in the distance, while Bull was focusing gloomily on the ground, his body language revealing suppressed rage. Lossoshér seemed to no longer even register the world around him. His gaze looked dead.

“We were fleeing from the war, starting very far away,” Rhodan attempted again. “Then we got lost along the way. We’re not from Rofus. What city are we in?”

This earned him dubious looks. For a while, nobody answered.

“You were involved in the interplanetary war,” Rukaar guessed. “Hence the equipment that’s unknown to us. Who shot you down? Krefuur or Desdemoona?”

Rhodan stuck to his own question. “Where are we?” He sensed that he’d broken the ice and he wanted to push further.

Rukaar raised a hand. “This is Remanor. Should Nerlan the Great content himself with anything other than the capital? As soon as he captures the inner ring and the citadel, he’ll take over one or two of the underground production compounds and step into the interplanetary war. You can be thankful to have ended up with him. Nerlan treats his soldiers well if they bring him victories.”

“Remanor? The capital?” Chaktor echoed, uncomprehending.

Rhodan immediately grasped what Chaktor was getting at. The capital of Rofus was actually called Tschugnor. What did this all mean? Were they in another system with a blue sun after all? Had the transmitter sent them an unimaginable distance across space?

Mar-Ton shoved Lossoshér so hard that the old man almost fell. “Why are you talking with them so much, Sir-Lan?” he hissed. “They’re just cannon fodder.”

Rhodan helped Lossoshér, supporting him with his bound hands. Rukaar raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything. The look in her azure eyes appeared puzzled to Rhodan.

“Cannon fodder?” Bull said, making his irritation audible after looking lost in himself until now. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean? Is there some kind of battle coming up?”

Again, the Ferrons laughed in their own way, making strange sounds and hitting their legs with their hands.

“Not a battle.” The translator made it sound like a chuckle. “*The* battle. When we have the citadel, we’ve won.”

Rhodan listened carefully. In the distance, he could hear explosions. The inner city was under constant bombardment. He saw smoke rising up between high-rise buildings in the far distance.

“If this battle’s so important,” Rhodan pressed, “why did Durhai Nerlan separate Ras and the women? Shouldn’t we all be fighting?”

“Don’t question Durhai Nerlan’s actions,” Rukaar said gravely. “My men and I are to take you to my district, so we’re doing it. It’s as simple as that. Nerlan will already have his own plans for the others.”

Bull pulled at the handcuffs and shook off his two guards with hard shoulder thrusts. “His own plans,” he spat. “I saw the look on that fat blue toad’s face! I can imagine what kind of *plans* those are!”

Rhodan shuddered. Until then, he hadn’t considered what could happen to Thora and Sue. *I didn’t* want *to think about it,* he corrected himself in his thoughts. *I have to remain able to act. If I go insane or give up, it won’t help anyone.*

Rukaar exhaled a laugh that sounded like a hiss. Was that how she expressed her indifference or her contempt? “What’s the problem, stubble-head? The white-haired one is a soldier. She’ll already know how to handle herself. I’m sure it’s not her first time.”

“And Sue?” Bull asked bitterly. “What about Sue? She’s a child, dammit!”

Rukaar’s face was a mask. “Whatever Nerlan wants to happen will happen. His will is law. He takes who he wants to take.”

Rhodan saw Bull leap forward. “Don’t!” he warned his friend, but it was too late. Bull had grabbed Rukaar’s throat with his bound hands. Her reaction came as promptly as Bull’s. The commander raised her knee and struck him hard between the legs.

Lossoshér backed away, while Chaktor and Rhodan were held

even more tightly. They could only watch as Bull slumped to the ground with a dull thud.

“I should kill you,” Rukaar said mercilessly.

Rhodan read an expression on her face that puzzled him. “But you won’t,” he said with relief. “Why not?”

Rukaar looked at him. Pain filled her blue eyes. “Why do you care so much about the wellbeing of the women or the dark one? The way you look and talk, it’s not as though you’re *Dimar*. You’re not a family. You know how things are.”

No, Rhodan didn’t know at all. How should he? None of it made any sense. Pondering, he watched as two soldiers dragged Bull up. They seemed to have gotten caught up in a war that had been raging longer than just a day or two. They simply couldn’t be on Rofus, even though Vega was visible in the sky.

Unless… He thought back to Kerlon’s crazy story. The tragic Arkonide who had gone crazy over millennia of solitude, surrounded by corpses in cryo-tanks. They’d met him on a moon of Lannol during the Topsidans’ invasion. *No!* He shook his head. *That’s insane. Impossible.*

But he unwittingly began to keep watch for anything that might confirm his hypothesis, crazy as it was. Maybe he was only doing it to distract himself from Sue and Thora’s fate. He scanned the area, seeking proof of the inconceivable…and found it!

“Chaktor,” he hissed quietly. “Look at the tower over there, behind the tower block. The one with the enamel-like mosaics. It looks like part of a larger facility in the heart of the city. Do you know it?”

He saw Chaktor freeze. The Ferron’s mouth fell open. The small group stopped.

Rukaar clicked his tongue impatiently as if she had to spur on a disobedient horse. She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Don’t push my generosity,” she said threateningly.

Lossoshér appeared to awaken from his trance. He looked around before again directing his gaze at the tower with its three-pronged tip protruding above a golden helm. A tower that should actually be missing its tip and definitely belonged to the desert fort on Rofus.

Rhodan remembered it perfectly. He'd seen it just a few weeks ago during the invasion of the Topsidans. An attack had forced them to flee, and they'd gone through the transmitter in the palace on Ferrol. The matching transmitter had been on Rofus, in the desert fort occupied by the Topsidans. A Rofus they had to now be temporally separated from by over ten thousand years.

"We're in the Dark Age," Rhodan affirmed.

Bull made a sound of surprise. "Perry, up there is the fortress where they kept Thora prisoner!"

Rhodan told him to be quiet with a nod. He was the first to catch himself. *There'll be time to talk when we're alone.*

Shaking her head, Rukaar kept walking. Clearly, she thought the group was totally insane. Her men remorselessly dragged Rhodan and the others along.

They reached an area that looked inhabited. A barbed wire fence separated it from the rest of the suburb. Rhodan saw laundry hanging on a line. He heard a baby crying. Neither seemed to fit the surroundings. "Is this your district?" he asked Rukaar.

She nodded proudly. "Over two hundred soldiers and their families live in my division." She then gestured to indicate an area inside the fence that was surrounded by an additional set of black barbed wire. A rolling shutter was the only way in or out. "That's where you're going until you prove yourselves. You're Dradesires—the lowest class of soldier. Only when you've stood your ground will you be allowed to seek out a ruin in the free section. Until then, you'll be under guard."

Rukaar led them into the inner camp and stopped in front of a gray tent.

Mar-Ton stepped forward and gave each of them a yellow band. “Tie it around your arm. Taking it off is forbidden. Lose the band and you lose your arm.”

With mixed feelings, Rhodan took the wide yellow band and knotted it around his upper arm over the bicep. “What about our friends? Can we visit them?”

Rukaar’s face darkened and she rolled her eyes. “You still don’t get it, do you, pale-skin? You’re cannon fodder for the big battle. In two days, you’ll be dead, and we can take your bones to the bone tower. What do your women matter to you anymore?” With that, she spun around and left the inner camp. Her men followed her like silent shadows.

Rhodan touched the band around his arm. It itched uncomfortably beneath his fingers. He waited until Rukaar was out of hearing range, then turned to the others. “Can it be true? Did the transmitter take us not just through space, but through *time*?”

“It’s impossible.” Lossoshér faced the tower jutting out above the other buildings in the distance. “It has to be a coincidence that this tower looks so much like the one from the desert fort on Rofus.”

Rhodan slowly shook his head. “‘Impossible.’ You should cut that word out of your lexicon, Lossohér. Even if it’s never happened *so far*, the facts speak for themselves. We’re stranded in the past. *Ten thousand years* in the past. This is the Ferron Dark Age. And we’re on Rofus.”

“But the fortress in the Snake Mountains is located in a desert!” Chaktor began. “The climate—”

“Has changed,” Bull interrupted bluntly. “That does happen over ten thousand years. Even to the best planets.” He heaved a sigh. “The mystery of the destroyed transmitter interests me way less than what’ll happen to Ras, Thora, and Sue.”

Lossoshér’s shoulders slumped.

Next to him, Chaktor looked at the floor, a forlorn expression on

his face. “We can’t help anybody. We’re lost. With the transmitter gone, there’s no way back. The situation is completely hopeless.”

“No,” Rhodan disagreed. “It’s not. There’s a way out.”

Thora da Zoltral

Crest, what have I done? Thora gazed across the bombed-out street. It stank of melted plastic. Smoke was rising up here and there. This had to be the area where PROTO had detected combat operations. Worried, she looked at Sue and felt an unfamiliar sense of guilt. She was to blame for the human girl ending up in this terrible place.

Thora knew scenes like this from the simulations. In the fiction games, you could experience any and all wars the Imperium had ever waged. There, when it got too much, when her pulse reached a critical level, she was pulled out. No one would rescue her from *this* grisly scenario, however, even if her heart gave out. Her search for Crest had led them to their undoing, and the transmitter lay in pieces under rubble and ashes. Her life was hanging by a thread, as the humans would say.

Even so, she had to be strong. Sue needed her. She surreptitiously touched the girl’s shoulder. “We won’t give up,” she said quietly, knowing that she wasn’t just *saying* it, but that she believed it too.

“I’m so worried about Ras,” Sue whispered back, her eyes resting on the pale yellow stretcher two of Nerlan’s soldiers were carrying. The teleporter was lying on it like a corpse.

Nerlan, who was walking a few steps ahead of them, unexpectedly replied. As he spoke, he didn’t turn to look at them. “Nothing will happen to the dark-skinned one. He’ll survive the infection. I see it.”

“Infection?” Sue breathed, stumbling on the ground. Thora grabbed her upper arm to support her.

Nerlan made an indefinable sound. A laugh? “Of course. What did you expect, child? Infections kill a lot of wounded. Did you think your friend was an exception? I’m sure you too see the *Sarvon* in him—the great hero.”

Sue fell silent. Nerlan didn’t seem to be expecting an answer. Wordlessly, they trudged over chunks of rubble and through ankle-deep puddles.

Thora noticed Sue pushing ever closer to the stretcher. Nerlan never looked behind him. Either he hadn’t realized what Sue was doing or he didn’t care. While walking, Sue grasped Tschubai’s hand.

She wants to help him. Brave girl. Thora stopped moving to give Sue some time. The girl couldn’t use her para-gift in motion; it needed as much calm as she could get. Immediately, soldiers crowded around Thora. One poked her in the back, but Thora didn’t keep walking. She applied a Dagor meditation, anchoring her legs firmly in the street and holding her ground. Tschubai’s stretcher stopped too. Within seconds, Thora had everyone’s attention.

“I need water,” she said demandingly. “Is it customary for the great Nerlan to let his prisoners go thirsty?” She was still angry that Rhodan had surrendered so readily, even though she felt instinctively that it had been the right call.

Nerlan turned around. A smirk split his pimply, scar-pocked face. “You have spirit, white-hair. I like that. I’ll drive that out of you yet. And now keep walking or I’ll put you on a leash and make you crawl behind me on all fours.”

Thora suppressed a sharp retort. *Oh how I’d love to put this bastard before an Arkonide military court.* She assured herself that Sue had used the time; the two nodded quickly to one another before they walked on. Sue looked pale, a thin smile on her lips. She’d undoubtedly done everything she could to kick-start Tschubai’s recovery. Maybe the teleporter would be back to his usual self soon and could free them from this megalomaniac.

It was raining when they arrived at a district with largely intact

buildings. One stood out in particular. Apart from one missing tower out of seven, it was completely intact. Mosaics covered the entire outer wall. Amid the distant rumbling of the shelling, Ferron workers were adding new tiles. Thora found the scene grotesque. Even though the war could be heard, seen, and tasted, construction was going on as if there was nothing more important than this building. On top of that, they were building in a style totally unknown to her, with ludicrous and gaudy decorative elements. The planet truly had to be *very* far from the central world of Ferrol.

The soldiers shifted closer. Thora kept so close behind Sue that she could have touched her at any moment. She followed Nerlan up a wide staircase into the grandiose building. A steel door slid up in front of them that didn't seem to match the palatial facade. The inside of the building looked barren and unfitting, but functional to make up for it. Steel plating surrounded them, protection from air raids. A shaft led down into the earth at an oblique angle, ending in a platform.

Thora and Sue had barely stepped onto the platform before it sank down. Along with them, Nerlan, Tschubai, and five soldiers descended into the depths. An uncomfortable pressure spread in Thora's ears. At the same time, she breathed in a sickeningly sweet scent, similar to one she had smelled on an elderly, eccentric woman in Terrania. It distantly reminded her of moldy mandarin oranges.

Like an unbalanced perfume, she thought, disgusted. *Is Nerlan using this to cover up the stench that comes from his pus pimples?*

The shaft above her looked as gray and dull as everything else in this inscrutable world. Thora cast a brief glance upward before feeling the butt of a gun between her shoulder blades. With gritted teeth, she stepped into a magnificently furnished room. A heavy red table stood in the middle with some low-tech devices sitting on it. Thora recognized a projector and a com station with portable receivers. Around the table, by the walls, stood grotesque statues, glimmering in the artificial light as if made of gemstones. Although they shimmered blue like Ferrons' skin, they had a great number of limbs. Depictions of local fauna, perhaps?

Even more unsettling were the triangular black quartz plates in the ceiling. At first Thora thought they were mirrors, but they didn't reflect anything. Behind her, the platform traveled deeper into the building, Tschubai along with it. How many underground stories could there be? The command post had to be at least fifteen meters below ground.

"Sit!" Nerlan ordered her and Sue. With an imperious gesture, he indicated a patch of carpet between two particularly ghastly statues with ten contorted-looking limbs.

Sue sank to the ground with exhaustion. Thora preferred to stay standing. She gently moved her arms. Her limbs suddenly felt stiff in the handcuffs. Attentively, she looked around the room and tried to block out the danger they were in. She didn't manage it. Around and around in her mind cycled the thoughts of what Nerlan might have in mind for her and Sue. The fear was lurking in her, just waiting to pounce.

Nerlan sat to the side of them, at the table. The four remaining soldiers moved back to the shaft entrance. Two each stood on the left and right sides like silent gray guardians.

Apart from the number of limbs, they're hardly any different from the ugly statues.

"What are you going to do to us?" Thora said, breaking the silence. "And why aren't you offering us a place at the table as we deserve?"

As earlier, while walking, Nerlan didn't turn to them. He seemed not to think it necessary. His treatment of them made Thora furious. She was an Arkonide starship commander! But what was she expecting? This savage likely didn't even know what an Arkonide was. He thought she and Sue were unusual Ferrons—freaks of nature.

"Be grateful to be allowed in my presence." Nerlan's voice held a harsh ring. He didn't seem to be in the mood to talk.

Beside her, Sue raised her head. As weak as her body looked, her

voice was full of energy. “Where are you taking Ras?”

This time, Nerlan turned to them after all. Resting his elbows on the tabletop, he laced his fingers together. What he was expressing with this body language remained a mystery to Thora.

“Ras...” he said, drawing out the syllable. “An unusual name for an unusual person, don’t you think?” He was speaking only to Sue, as if Thora were nothing more than air.

“Will he get better?” Sue asked shakily.

“But of course. I need him. Think of the legend of Chantin-Ohn.”

Thora cleared her throat. “I’m afraid we don’t know that, Durhai Nerlan.”

Again, he acted as though she weren’t in the room. Thora’s rage festered. But she knew from the simulations that she was still being treated well for a prisoner. She forced herself to remain calm. She wouldn’t show any weakness in front of this fat pile of pus.

“Ras will fight for me in the battle,” Nerlan explained. In that moment, he sounded as good-natured as a kind uncle telling his niece that he’d bought her a present. “Your friend will spur on my men, for according to legend, the great black Chantin-Ohn is said to be invincible.”

There was a sound that Thora couldn’t place at first, then the translator helped her. Nerlan was guffawing with laughter.

“Invincible,” he snapped. “A silly old wives’ tale. But idiots believe in the idiotic, no?”

Before Thora or Sue could answer, a bright tone pierced the room. The platform arrived again. Five men and three women entered, put their hands on their chests, then opened their arms. Nerlan acknowledged the greeting with a weak nod.

“Take a seat. Don’t let my new arrivals disturb you.”

One of the women looked at Thora with curiosity. Thora met her

gaze with a prideful one of her own. She recognized Rukaar and one other soldier in the group, registered the differences in the soldiers' clothing and perceived them as individuals. Like Rukaar, the others wore adornments on their stand-up collars that designated them as commanders. Three of the men showed classic Ferron traits: the protruding brow, eyes on the smaller size, and compact build. But even their faces were starkly different from one another. Most striking to Thora were two commanders whose foreheads hardly bulged at all. Their similarity was enough to suggest they were brothers.

The two Ferron women wore their hair cut short—shorter than the men. Their noses and lip contours looked more delicate, but the hard look in their eyes was easily the equal of their male comrades.

They look like patriots. Thora looked into Rukaar's azure eyes. *Like they're blinded. Small-minded and mentally hard.*

Nerlan activated the projector on the table with a switch. A three-dimensional image of the inner city appeared with various points on the outer area marked in green and violet. Thora could make out artillery and tanks in miniature in front of a wide, thick wall.

Nerlan's planned positions. Thora leaned forward with interest. From the fiction games, she knew a great number of scenarios. This one puzzled her. If she understood the situation correctly, the outer city was already captured, and only the inner core of twenty square kilometers at most still had to be taken. As her gaze wandered across the depiction, she caught on.

The enemy positions aren't marked. If they don't know those, they're expecting urban warfare. But why don't they know the positions? It should be possible to find them out. And why are they going so close to them? I'd move my entire attack at least thirty kilometers back from there and exterminate the enemy positions from a safe distance.

She focused intently on the citadel. The Ferrons' weapons could have reduced that building to rubble and ashes. That the facility was still so intact could only have one explanation: it had been bombarded very little, if at all. Nerlan wanted to take the fortress as

unscathed as possible. Maybe he meant to rule from there.

Thora faltered for a moment, taken aback. Was it possible?

I know this fortress—this layout. And the tower! I was imprisoned right over there. But that's not possible. If that's the desert fort on Rofus, then… She didn't finish the thought. *Later,* she chided herself. *I'll think about what I've just discovered later.* At the moment, the most crucial task was fighting an escape route from the command post. She had to get back to Rhodan and the others.

"We strike in two days," Nerlan said to the group. "Most high-rise buildings in the designated attack lanes are already destroyed. There will be time to send in the ground troops."

"It's still too early," objected a commander with a smooth forehead with a wide scar emblazoned on it. He leaned forward. His voice sounded pleasantly gentle, as if he were speaking to a nervous animal. "We should wait a few more days until Jassnor is there with his people. The Grochoos may be sissies, but they'll fight for their city."

"They'll present no obstacle to speak of." Nerlan raised his head and looked around the table as if to see who was with him and who was against him. "For this special occasion, I've put aside two hundred flash bombs that will make the light of Vega look like nothing above the city streets. A blind enemy is a weak enemy."

"But…" Rukaar rose from her seat. "What about my soldiers? They're supposed to be fighting right on the front line! Are you going to blind them too?"

"Sit down, Rukaar."

Rukaar sat. Thora sensed the tension in the room as if she could taste it on her tongue. Clearly, talking back to Nerlan so strongly was not what people did.

"War demands sacrifices," Nerlan said plainly.

"Sacrifices. Always sacrifices. I can't hear that anymore!" Rukaar protested. "We have so many children in the camp. Why are you

robbing them of their parents, Durhai?"

Thora observed as the other meeting participants grew uneasy. One of the short-haired members looked frantically at the exit.

Nerlan leaned back in his chair, ostensibly relaxed. To Thora, he looked like a crocodile from Earth right before it snapped its jaws. "Then you should seek out a healer, Rukaar. Your ears have been giving me trouble for a long time now. We will deploy the blinding weapons and then go in and clean it all up. Poisoned munitions are still plentiful. The only good city-dweller is a dead city-dweller."

Rukaar stood up again, her palms pressed against the table. Rage covered her face. All the others shrank back. "Why not do it with fewer losses? Send the T-fighters in first, Durhai. Forget about the flash bombs. And give the city-dwellers a chance to surrender. You're always saying yourself how scarce resources are."

"The Gorchoos had their chance, Sir-Lan Rukaar. Now sit down again."

Nerlan's face wore an expression that Thora would mostly closely describe as hateful. It was clear as day how little he liked Rukaar's protest. Thora's stomach froze into an ice-cold lump. Rukaar was going too far. Thunder and lightning were sure to be unleashed at any moment. Next to her, Sue pushed herself back against the wall.

Rukaar remained standing. "You're acting too cruelly, Nerlan. You should—"

Nerlan rose up. With an agility that Thora would never have expected from the fat man, he jumped onto the tabletop and kicked Rukaar in the face with his boot. Groaning, the commander collapsed back into her seat. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth and dripped over her collar onto her chest. She threw her hands in front of her eyes, wheezing.

"Go!" Nerlan shouted at the other commanders. "The briefing is adjourned. I'll have you summoned when everything is settled."

Thora watched, tense, as Nerlan turned to Rukaar. The fat Durhai appeared to have tuned her and Sue out completely. Despite that, there was no chance to flee. The four guards in simple uniforms at the shaft entrance were keeping everything in view. Their hands rested on their weapons.

Nerlan grabbed Rukaar by the throat. “You are to use my honorific title, Rukaar. Don’t forget yourself again. If you embarrass me once more, I’ll put a bullet in your stomach and watch as you miserably bleed out! Is that understood?”

Rukaar gasped for breath. “Yes...Durhai. I... I understand.”

He dragged her out of her chair and flung her to the ground, where she fell on her hands and knees. “Then get out of my command post! There must be something in your camp division for you to be doing. I don’t want to see you again until the battle.”

Staggering, Rukaar got up. She leaned against the wall for support. Thora watched as she put in a great deal of effort to pull herself together and leave the room standing upright.

Nerlan sat down at the table again, his back to them. Thora felt a hand reaching for hers. Sue had stood. For a moment, Thora thought the child was seeking solace, but when she looked into Sue’s eyes, it looked more as though the girl wanted to soothe *her*. Indeed, Thora’s heart was pounding beneath her breastplate. It was as though Nerlan had kicked her rather than the Ferron woman.

The only sound in the room was the electronic humming of the equipment. Otherwise, the silence seemed absolute. Thora clenched her teeth hard and indicated for Sue to sit again. Sue silently shook her head.

With an abrupt jerk, Nerlan turned around. The gaze from his small eyes bored into Thora’s. “Today has been unpleasant enough. It’s time to attend to the finer things in life. You may be glad, white-hair, as I am choosing you first.”

“For what?” Thora asked calmly, although she feared she already knew the answer.

“For my enjoyment,” Nerlan said, faintly stunned. “What else? You were born to serve me. Otherwise you wouldn’t have ended up in my possession.”

Thora bit her lip. Completely delusion and yet logical in and of itself. This Ferron was truly sick. He probably saw himself as the chosen one—as a savior for his people.

“And if I don’t want to?” she asked curtly.

Sue looked at her with pleading eyes, as if begging Thora not to challenge this monster. Thora turned her gaze away from Sue. There were moments when she couldn’t yield without betraying herself. Even if it spelled her end. Wasn’t it said that only an Arkonide was prouder than death? Icy cold spread uniformly through her.

“If you don’t want to, you don’t want to,” Nerlan said indifferently. “I don’t force anybody.” He reached for the projectile weapon in the holder on his chest strap. “I’ll give you a choice.”

5.

On William Tifflor's Trail

Washington, DC

September 17, 2036

The White House was a burned-out ruin.

It's not even white. More like gray. Gucky took in the devastated building with interest. While in Terrania, he'd seen pictures of this city that was so important to the humans. *It must have been pretty impressive before they wrecked it,* he thought, impassive.

He was struck by how silent Mildred and Julian had gotten. His hairless friends were Americans and were—like every person on this blue planet—crazy in their own unique way. They put a lot of stock in symbols. For them, these buildings were part of their home, even though they'd lived in totally different places and the country was huge by their standards.

Home, Gucky thought. *That means something different to everyone.* He looked over the ruined street and forced himself not to let his thoughts wander back into space, light years away. There were things he didn't like thinking about.

Earth didn't seem so bad to him. A little too warm, maybe. Full of crazies who were all far too tall, but there was potential for sure. And there was plenty to discover and play with. That was actually the main reason he'd agreed so readily. He'd been bored in Terrania and wanted to see the places he knew from photos and from the impressions he'd read in people's thoughts at the Lakeside Institute. The word "adventure" had flicked a switch in his head.

Julian was looking for a free parking spot on the large area near the Supreme Court set aside specifically for tourists, but he couldn't find one. When a space finally opened up and Julian was about to reverse into it, another car got in the way and forced him to brake.

The strange driver—a lanky youth—meant to steal the spot. In his thoughts, Julian got *really* agitated by what he saw as reckless behavior.

Gucky twisted his mouth into a grin and gave the car a forceful telekinetic push that moved it aside. “Go ahead and park, sport,” he invited Julian.

The latter grinned back in the rear-view mirror. His youthful face looked relaxed for the first time since they’d left Lakeside.

The other driver drove on, shaking his head, evidently not connecting the incident with them.

They got out and walked toward the street. A gray-haired man on the sidewalk looked at them with quite some interest, scrutinizing Gucky.

“Walk on all fours,” Julian demanded in a harsh whisper.

Gucky stiffened. “Do *what?*” It was bad enough the humans were so gigantic, and now he was supposed to make himself even smaller on purpose?

“For God’s sake, Gucky, you mustn’t speak!” Mildred got to her knees and put her hands on his shoulders, hiding his body from the gray-haired man’s curious gaze. “Either put the robe and hat back on or act as though you’re a dog. Please. *We* know you’re not, of course.”

Gucky lowered his head. He definitely couldn’t be bothered with the itchy robe and sight-restricting hat anymore. It remained a puzzle to him that humans willingly wrapped themselves up in cotton, synthetic fibers, or processed caterpillar cocoons all day. The planet was warm enough already. Nonetheless, he realized he was drawing too much attention with his human-like body language. Just then, a smooth-skinned young female walked past them, pushing a wheeled cart; the human child inside it pointed to him and began to bawl snot and water. Gucky sensed the child’s panic.

Gritting his teeth, he got down on all fours, lowered his head, and trotted alongside Mildred. He used his telekinesis to support his arm muscles.

They went along the ruined street a little way, still receiving rude stares, but slightly more restrained ones. Crowds of humans were trekking past burned-out buildings in silence. Gucky wondered again about the humans' separateness. Everyone had their own car; everyone went their own way, even when someone else was walking beside them. Only very rarely did two of them touch each other's hands. Earth's inhabitants seemed like little islands to him, separated by invisible water. Nowhere did he see mourning groups standing together, even though many homes had been destroyed. They didn't even appear to share their pain.

Mildred sounded despondent. "It must have been bad. All the fighting. Look at the buildings. They whitewashed it all in the media."

"Of course they did," Julian grumbled. "America doesn't want to lose face in front of the world. They always downplay it."

They had just reached the nearest intersection when a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned man came up to them. He was wearing a charcoal gray top with a color-changing feature and synthetic pants, along with so-called "Hypers," a kind of foot covering that seemed strange to Gucky, since they revealed parts of the wearer's feet depending on the color mode. In Beijing, too, some people had been wearing sneakers like that.

Gucky effortlessly delved into the man's thoughts. His name was Maro Porter, and he was hoping to get a few dollars for showing them around.

"Hey," Maro greeted them with outstretched arms. "Welcome to Washington. I'm Maro. Need a low-cost tour guide for the most exciting sightseeing event you've ever experienced?" He flashed two gleaming rows of perfect white teeth that would have made Gucky jealous if they'd been a little sharper. "I know how to get into the ruins of the White House. Show me Benjamin Franklin's face and I'll take you inside."

Julian and Mildred looked first at each other, then at Gucky. The Ilt sensed their doubt, but also their curiosity. Mildred in particular would gladly have gone inside the White House. She was thinking of some room that she called the Oval Office, in which a bunch of (in her mind) really exciting things had happened. Gucky couldn't imagine that anyone had flown around on the ceiling inside. Nothing he knew so far about Earth's governments sounded like fun and thus couldn't be exciting.

"We're more interested in the Supreme Court," Julian said hesitantly.

"The court?" Maro asked. "Why? I can show you something better. At the Lincoln Memorial, the Fantan picked up the reflecting pool and then dropped it again three hundred meters away. Apparently, it was worthless to them without the reflection of the building."

Gucky puckered his lips. His nose itched. He'd had more than enough of the Fantan for now.

"But the Supreme Court was where they held the trial against Crest!" Mildred interjected. "That's thrilling enough, isn't it?"

"Ah, I get you." Maro showed his permanent smile. "Arkonide fans. If you want, I'll take you in there too for a hundred dollars. I have connections. The soldiers don't take their jobs too seriously as long as there's something in it for them."

Gucky checked Maro's intentions and lightly poked Mildred in the leg with his head. She looked down at him. He nodded emphatically as he'd learned from the humans.

Mildred and Julian exchanged a glance. Julian extended his hand. "Okay, Maro. But you'll get the money after we're in."

Maro took the hand and shook it. Gucky knew this gesture as a sign of welcome and didn't really see why it was relevant in this situation. It couldn't have had anything to do with friendship. Were the two forging some kind of pact?

“Agreed.” Maro walked in front in a good mood. “You don’t look like the types to screw me over. But you are pretty out there. The Supreme Court, huh? The others always want to see where good old Drummond said his last words. That’s the absolute highlight. Aylin Kerson’s bullet got him right under the flag, between the columns. You must have seen it, right? It went all around the world. Made her the fifth person in history to assassinate a US president.”

Maro gave them some details of what life had been like in Washington over the past few weeks. None of it interested Gucky. He was much more intrigued by what Maro thought about in the pauses between speaking. Maro kept stealing glances at him with even more pictures of presidents in his head.

He wants money, Gucky realized. *He doesn’t care about anything else. And he somehow wants to turn me into more dead presidents.*

Gucky decided not to make a scene, but to continue spying on Maro instead. It actually flattered his ego a little bit that Maro was thinking about him so much. Maro didn’t think he was an alien, but something genetically engineered. A kind of artificial creature made in a lab.

They reached the Supreme Court, which was a ruin just like the White House. Only in this case, there was nothing left standing but the foundations. Chunks of columns lay scattered and yellow police tape kept prying eyes at bay. Several signs warned against trespassing. This couldn’t have been caused just by the explosion staged by Rhodan and Mercant in the rescue attempt. There had been fighting at the Supreme Court. Whether pro-Rhodan rebels or anti-Rhodan fanatics, one side or the other hadn’t held back with the explosives. Alternatively, Gucky couldn’t rule out a mishap of some kind. He was dubious about the Fantan’s parking skills. Maybe the walking mushroom things had landed an overly large spacecraft on a particularly sensitive stress point of the building.

Gucky felt Julian’s discouragement. What could they hope to find in a pile of rubble like this? If there were any clues, they were gone by now.

In Maro’s head, the cogs were still turning. The man had some

nerve. *He wants to separate me from Mildred and Julian so he can kidnap me,* Gucky realized. *Then sell me.*

For the briefest instant, he considered making Maro fly a lap above the busy street, but then he let it be for Julian and Mildred's sake. Maro assumed some Arkonide know-how behind Gucky's origins. The reference to Crest had set him down that road.

I'll take the thing to Heston, Maro thought. *Greg Heston deals in everything, even creatures and people. He even grabbed some from the court during the trial. That old bastard can't pull the wool over* my *eyes.*

Interesting, thought Gucky, continuing to listen in. Apparently, this Greg Heston was a dealer in stolen goods, including particularly special people. Maro had no real idea what kind of people, but Gucky started to have a suspicion. He'd spent a lot of time studying Earth and the recent occurrences on it in all kinds of ways. Terrania wasn't the only place with mutants. In fact, Monterny and his charges had been present at the trial too. Was Heston collecting mutants to sell them to the highest bidder? What kind of a being did you have to be to trade your own species for money?

A sudden headache tormented Gucky. Reading Marco's thoughts was quite a strain. Gucky's gaze fell on Julian. *Whether Heston is collecting mutants or not isn't priority number one right now,* he thought. *What's important is spying on him. If people have disappeared, Julian's dad might be among them.*

He again poked Mildred with his head and hoped that his hairless friend understood what he wanted from his pointed gaze alone.

Sensing Mildred's hesitation, he snapped at her thigh, effortlessly pushing his tooth through the thin fabric of her pants. It didn't taste too bad if you liked meat. No worse than other human food, anyway. Humans still had a lot to learn about cuisine.

"Ow! Gucky!" Mildred complained. Then, reddening, she fell silent and looked at Maro Porter. "Sorry. I think the dog's hungry, and..." She gave Maro a smile. "So are we, to be honest. We'd love to carry on with the tour after some refreshments, though. Can you

wait a few minutes?" She gestured toward a hotdog stand on the other side of the street that served the tourists at particularly inflated prices. "We'll grab something quickly and be right back."

"Sure, why not? I have to make a phone call anyhow." Maro pulled out a pod.

Gucky pushed Mildred away from the man. Together, they crossed the street.

"Well? What's up?" asked Julian.

Whispering, Gucky told them what he'd discovered. In the process, he expressed all his contempt for how this Maro thought about people and animals. "This black-market dealer, Heston, is much worse, no doubt. Julian, he might know something about your father. We have to get to him."

"How?" Julian asked, furrowing his brow.

"That part is obvious," Gucky replied, letting his incisor gleam. "I let myself get kidnapped by Maro."

Mildred Orsons

Mildred wasn't really comfortable putting Gucky in that kind of danger, but the Mousebeaver assuaged her fears. Without a doubt, he possessed extraordinary abilities. He could teleport himself away from Maro at any time.

The plan was for Gucky to let Maro take him to Heston so he could spy on the latter. He'd inform Julian and Mildred as soon as he knew where Heston was located. Their meeting point would be the Supreme Court; Gucky was confident he could find his way back there again. When his mission was successfully completed, he'd return to the court and wait in a hiding spot among the rubble until he detected Mildred or Julian's thoughts. Then he'd use telekinesis to make them aware of his presence.

Hopefully it'll all go according to plan. Mildred wasn't hungry and

the hotdog tasted appalling. She'd never been served such nauseatingly hot mustard.

They went back to Maro, who was beaming at them. His face no longer seemed as attractive to Mildred as it had at first. The friendliness was no more than a facade. They engaged in a little small talk, with Maro explaining a few more things before leading them up to the court grounds. Not far from a pair of soldiers, he paused.

"Freys just became a father," he said with a wink, nodding over at one of the soldiers.

"So?" Julian asked, bewildered.

Mildred crossed her arms in front of her chest. "You want more money, right, Maro?"

Maro tilted his head. "Well, honestly, you look like the kind of people who might have some of the new currency. Do you?"

"Solar," Julian murmured quietly. "Yeah, we have some. But only when you take us onto the grounds too. You get the cash when we're in there."

"Inside?" Maro grimaced pitifully. "You two look fit, but I'm not." He scratched his side. "I was in a car accident three years ago, and ever since then, my intervertebral discs have been giving me trouble. I can take you in, but actually climbing around in there...no thanks. That's something for adventurers."

"Then you'll get the money after," Julian said, unflinching.

Mildred was afraid that Julian's obstinance would make Maro decide against kidnapping Gucky, but the man backed down. He showed his teeth again, this time looking more like he was baring them than smiling.

"Sure, all right. I'll go arrange it with Freys. You can go inside already. But leave the dog there. He doesn't belong in the ruins."

Nor do humans, Mildred thought. Large pieces of rubble were

lying jumbled on top of each other, practically screaming of imminent collapse. In the middle of all the chaos, the rubble thinned to give a view of the dusty bench. Part of it was missing as if cut off with a scalpel. The view was surreal. Mildred was reminded of Thora firing on the Supreme Court. The bench must have been hit by the single disintegrator shot the Arkonide had unleashed.

She nodded to Maro. “Agreed. Take good care of him, okay? He’s my little sunshine.”

Mildred saw Gucky wink to her from where Maro couldn’t see. She couldn’t keep herself from saying that. To her, a human who would steal someone else’s dog was the absolute worst. She wished from the bottom of her heart for Maro to have a guilty conscience.

“Don’t worry about a thing.” Maro’s voice sounded jovial. “I’m your buddy. I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Mildred cast one last glance at Gucky, then went towards the ruins alongside Julian.

Gucky

It didn’t come easily to Gucky to sit on the street on his furry but nonetheless bare behind. Ordinarily, he’d have rested on his robust supporting tail. A smell was coming from the ground that he didn’t like. Before he’d even decided which buttcheek to touch the ground with first, Maro unexpectedly grabbed him.

Surprised, Gucky made a squeaking sound that sounded more like a pig than a dog. Maro almost dropped him in shock. Gucky pretended to be paralyzed with fear, giving Maro the necessary emotional support.

What do dogs actually do in these situations? They bark, right? In his uncertainty, he decided not to produce any more sounds for the time being and limit himself to body language.

Maro carried him a little way down the street. Mere seconds later, a black car pulled up alongside the already-parked cars and stopped. Gucky read in Maro's thoughts that he'd already called the driver, Ellen, while Gucky, Mildred, and Julian were at the hotdog stand.

He doesn't know anything either.

Ellen opened the driver's side door, went over to the trunk, and opened it for Maro. She didn't look good for a human female, and she smelled even worse than the street he hadn't wanted to sit on. A pungent haze of alcohol lingered on her breath. "That's ten dollars, Maro. And don't mess me around again, you hear me?"

Gucky was crammed into the trunk. The lid slammed down above him.

Snarled, he thought senselessly now that it no longer mattered. *I should have snarled. But maybe then they'd have started bawling like the human child.*

Somehow, Gucky hadn't been able to get that human child out of his mind. He'd shown Gucky in brutal terms that he was a visitor on an alien world. He didn't mean the humans any harm. If it had been up to him, he'd have led a very different life far away from this blue planet with its tall, furless inhabitants. But now he was here, and he'd make the best of it. *One day, all the children of this world will love me,* he decided.

An uncomfortable journey began. Gucky was thrown back and forth, feeling every bump in the road. His muscles began to cramp from his unnatural posture. He began to feel a little nauseous too, making him glad when the ride ended after just half an hour and Maro lifted him out of the trunk.

Gucky acted trusting and a little weakened. He even toyed with the idea of licking Maro's face, but he couldn't bring himself to do that. Maro probably didn't taste very good.

Maro carried him over to a small white building that didn't stand out among the other white buildings. He wheezed as he carried

Gucky up the small wooden staircase. The door opened immediately after he rang the bell; a short man with a thick ring of fat around his middle pushed it open. A wide, colorful shirt danced around his sizable belly. He had long, thinning hair tied into a braid.

If I had to address him, I'd call him Thousand, because he's as round as the zeroes in the number one thousand. And I'd call Maro a zero, because humans find that insulting.

"Maro, kid. What do you have for me here?" The fat man made space for Maro to enter with Gucky. His keen blue eyes subjected Gucky to a quick but thorough scan.

By now, Maro stank too—of sweat—since Gucky, with his body length of one meter, wasn't exactly light and also didn't see fit to make it any easier for Maro. Groaning, Maro carried him into the living room and set him down on a worn-out red towel. Gucky was briefly distracted by the towel underneath him. In Terrania, he'd never yet seen humans laying that kind of material on the floor. What good did it do? If the fat man had sat down on the floor, Gucky would have understood. But both men sat on chairs at a low table.

"I don't know exactly what it is," Maro admitted, "but I've never seen one like it before. This thing is rare, which means it's something for you, Heston. It's valuable for sure."

"Valuable?" Heston puffed, reaching for a glass of transparent liquid. "More like hideous. What is it? A cross between a mouse, a beaver, and an Entlebucher mountain dog?" Heston took a deep swig.

Gucky read in Heston's thoughts that the dealer was already on the line. He had his eye on this creature, thinking it was a genetically engineered breed that could serve well for experimental purposes. Also, like Maro, he had a suspicion of Arkonide influence. In that regard, he already had a buyer on hand.

As if the Arkonides are the only race in the entire universe, Gucky thought snidely. *Those white-haired goons shouldn't keep barging into the foreground.*

A tough negotiation followed. Heston offered Maro five hundred dollars. This prompted a flabbergasted reaction.

“Five hundred? I’d get more for a stolen puppy! Where do you expect to get a thoroughbred for under a thousand?”

“If it were an Entlebucher puppy, I’d give you a thousand dollars. But it’s not. A puppy’s cute, and cuteness sells itself. This thing here is...messed up. It’s worthless, Maro. I’m only buying it out of the kindness of my heart and because we’re buddies.

Gucky had to hold back his anger. As Heston was about to fill his glass from a liquid-filled bottle, he telekinetically pushed the fat man’s hand a little to the slight. Heston’s cursing was worth the exhaustion the act caused in him. Constantly reading thoughts like this took a toll on him. He’d have preferred to just stretch out on the red towel and sleep.

The two furless ones argued in circles for a while before Maro left, seven hundred dollars richer.

Greg Heston immediately reached into the side pocket of his black pants and pulled out a pod. “Call Monk,” he said quietly.

Gucky waited, tense. In Heston’s thoughts, he read that this Monk guy would definitely have a lot of interest in Gucky. On top of that, though, he had called Gucky an “ugly creature” of all things. When was the last time this small-ears human had looked at himself in the mirror? Someone with such lackluster head fur combined with those ruined teeth shouldn’t stray too far from the spaceship.

Heston spoke with a human whom he called “Mr. Moncadas” when speaking aloud, and toward whom he acted extremely obsequious. Monk had to be quite a few rungs higher than Maro, whom Heston had treated very differently. To him, Monk was like a living Besun to the Fantan. The black-market trader was stewing in fear sweat.

Gucky waited. He could teleport away whenever he wanted, but he peacefully lay on his stomach on the red towel and listened to

the conversation. He felt a light headache coming on. The constant telepathic eavesdropping was taxing.

Just under an hour passed, during which Heston contaminated the air with the stench of three smoke-producing sticks and drank half a bottle of the clear substance. Then the doorbell rang.

A brown-haired man entered who looked tall and elegant, a little like a preacher. Around his neck hung a silver chain with a conspicuous pendant: a small man nailed to a cross. Gucky had already seen that symbol and knew that so-called believers and preachers wore it. Since Crest's arrival, it had also become a new form of identifier among certain extreme rebels: the sufferer on the cross with long white hair and red eyes. Monk's sufferer looked human, however.

Like Heston, Monk was wearing black, only he was also covered in an open leather jacket. Beneath that, a plain black shirt could be seen above black pants. His boots were clean; the newcomer appeared to only rarely come in contact with the ground. Gucky looked up to focus on the man's head again. The man's facial features looked soft and somehow spiritual, as if Monk would never even hurt a fly. Around his mouth, though, a hard line was engraved, and the look in his cold, dead-looking hazel eyes made Gucky shudder.

He'd fit well in one of those movies where everything's dark and weird creatures walk around to nerve-racking music. At first, he looks like the nicest guy on the planet, then he murders everyone he finds.

Gucky had seen two human productions along those lines, but hadn't found them stimulating enough to bother with any more. He liked it better when a film could make him laugh.

Well then, Monk, let's see what you have in mind for me. Gucky reached out with his mental feelers to investigate Monk and found —nothing. He gulped. *What's wrong? What's the small-ears thinking?* He intensified his efforts.

Monk's facial features tensed. "A cross between a mouse and a beaver? And you called me over here for *that*, Hes?" Contempt and

anger resonated in his voice. He reached inside his leather jacket and pulled out a pistol. The barrel was aimed at Gucky's chest.

The sight sent an explosive surge of energy into Gucky's cells and made his nose itch. *Time to get out of here!* Gucky tried to teleport, but he couldn't focus on the jump. A sudden chill descended over his head and seemed to slow down his thought processes. Instead of strength, he found nothing inside himself but leaden exhaustion.

Before he could jump, Monk squeezed the trigger.

6.

Dradesires

Rofus

The Dark Age

"Peeling potatoes," Bull complained, his head a shade of crimson. The color of his skin was getting alarmingly close to that of his hair. "I guess the higher-ups couldn't think of anything better. I'd rather be cleaning a weapon or two."

"And you're surprised they didn't give a trustworthy-looking guy like you any weapons to clean?" Rhodan threw tuber number forty into the large bowl that two soldiers had brought them along with the red Wukas tubers. Not only was peeling off the plants' skins miserably difficult, they also had tiny little thorns that bit into the fingers as if they were alive and trying to feed on blood.

Lossoshér mechanically dropped another tuber into the bowl. "At least it's not hard manual labor," he said dismissively. "I could already picture myself digging ditches. It's still irresponsible, though. Who knows what germs these have on them." He looked at the pile of tubers like a personal enemy. "I wish I had my mixture for strengthening defenses with me. Then there's this horrible stench."

It wasn't only the plants that smelled strongly. The room reeked of foul breath and urine.

Chaktor grimaced. Again, one of the tubers' peels had stuck to his hand. He carefully removed the thorns. His skin looked as though he'd eagerly grabbed a cactus.

"We're almost done." Rhodan lowered his voice and surreptitiously looked around him. "While there's no one around, we should discuss how to proceed."

They were squatting on the concrete floor of a burned-out building next to the inner camp's administration tent. Lossoshér alone had the privilege of sitting on a crumpled blanket. Aside from them, three other groups of Dradesires had been there, also assigned to tuber-peeling duty. Since they were more experienced, they'd finished the work markedly more quickly and left by now.

"What's your plan?" Chaktor asked with interest. By now, he no longer looked as deathly pale as he had a few hours prior. The realization that they'd ended up in the Ferron Dark Age had been a shock to all of them. Everyone had had to work through it on their own, since there'd been no opportunity to talk undisturbed.

Rhodan was worried about Lossoshér in particular. At the start of the peeling duty, the elderly Ferron had been trembling so hard, it looked like he could fall to pieces at any moment.

Rhodan squared his shoulders. "We know the transmitter we came through to get here probably isn't the only one. There should be a second one in the future desert fort. We already used it in the present when we escaped from the Topsidans in the Red Palace on Ferrol." He looked at Lossoshér. "I think we should flee through that transmitter as soon as the battle starts raging. We'll have to trust that Sue can help Ras and he can teleport us some distance so we can get away. Or maybe the chaos of war will give us a way even without Ras. What matters is that we either have Thora, Sue, and Ras with us, or Sue can stabilize Ras enough for all three to get to us. When we get to safety, we can figure out how to change the settings on the transmitter in Thorta. I can't imagine that only one transmitter allows for travel through time. I'm sure we'll manage to get back to our time if we learn more about the technology."

"You're right." Chaktor beamed. "I'd totally forgotten about the transmitter in the fort! That's a real chance."

Bull nodded, full of confidence. "But how do we get to Sue and Thora?"

"We need more information." Rhodan threw tuber forty-four into the bowl; he'd gotten pretty quick by now. "As soon as we're finished, we'll head out. It's best if we split up. Bull and I will

gather all the knowledge we can about Nerlan and his prisoners. Whether they're still at the command post or if they've been taken elsewhere and how they're guarded. Chaktor, even if it might not seem that important to you given our situation, I'd be grateful if you could ask around about Crest. The appearance of an Arkonide can't have gone unnoticed. If he, Trker-Hon, and Michalovna are here, we have to find them and take them with us."

"Of course, Rhodan. I'm happy to help."

Rhodan looked around. The place where Lossoshér had just been sitting was empty now. "Where's Lossohér?"

"Let him be!" Bull threw another tuber onto the peeled pile. "He needs time to himself. Haven't you noticed how much this is all getting to him? He's an old man who unexpectedly has to live through the worst time in his people's history."

Rhodan nodded. "Then we'll work for his sake too."

Lossoshér

And the blackness sank over planets and moons. The all-pervasive blackness of war. Its scepter was the thirst for domination, its crown the bones of those it claimed, the hem of its cloak pure misery. The ugliest creatures stemmed from its loins, increasing the suffering of its own blood, becoming symbols of its spirit.

But in the darkest hour, the first Thort emerged from nonexistence and brought the Ferrons the Light.

Lossoshér lowered the cube in his fist; the letters faded away. His chest hurt and he swallowed several times. *How can it be that we're on Rofus in the Dark Age and the Thort isn't here?* Again and again, a sentence circled around in his mind that he'd heard two hours earlier while peeling the Wukas tubers: "Ninety years of the same shit to eat." Just a crude joke, to be sure. Of course there hadn't been the same food for ninety years, and even if there had been, the speaker—a scarred soldier with only one eye and radiation burns on

his face—wouldn't have been alive that whole time. It was about the time period. Ninety years of war. That meant the Thort had to be here. The sources called him by various names, but in one detail they were unanimous: the first Thort first appeared on Rofus, and it occurred shortly before the war's most devastating battle. Did that mean the attack on Remanor? But if that was true, where was he?

He has to be in the camp. He simply has to be. Before he rose up, he was said to be an ordinary soldier, not a resident of Remanor.

Resolute, Lossoshér stood up and stepped out from behind the remains of a wall that served as a privacy screen. Across from him was the burned-out building where Rhodan and the others were peeling tubers. He couldn't take the bad air any longer. It didn't matter to him whether they reached the transmitter in the city's inner ring. The important thing was the first Thort. Where was he? Were they in a parallel universe, or—and this theory seemed even more absurd to Lossoshér—were the holy records mistaken?

With unsteady steps, he went to the edge of the inner camp. Next to the barbed wire fence, a primitive well descended into the ground. As yet, there were no traces of the desert that this land would be in ten thousand years. Tiny stalks of grass stuck through the crust of earth.

A soldier in shabby combat dress came over to him. He belonged to the team guarding the inner camp. Lossoshér recognized this from the insignia on his abdomen, which was unique to those guards. "What are you doing out here, old man? Are you finished with peeling, or did you leave your pals to do it without you?"

"I'm looking for the Thort," Lossoshér said firmly. "I want to see him."

"Thort? I don't know anyone called that. And why should I? Stupid name if you ask me."

"But the Thort..." He trailed off. His legs gave way beneath him and he swayed. How could this nobody of a Ferron disparage the Thort?

“You’re looking pretty frail, old man. Did you grab the Wukas tubers a little too tightly?”

“The Thort...” Lossoshér managed before losing his train of thought. The weakness overcame him; he could hardly stand upright. He leaned on the wall of the well with both hands.

The soldier’s gaze looked unsettled. “You’re talking crazy. Should I have you taken over to the healing station?”

Lossoshér saw his chance. “Yes.” He waited until two more soldiers came and let them lead him away without resisting. After barely a few steps, he asked them about the Thort. They knew just as little about him as the first soldier. Lossoshér didn’t give up. He spoke to Ferron after Ferron. He didn’t fight back when, two blocks farther on, an overworked healer gave him an injection in the arm. Even as he was being sent back under guard, he asked everyone in reachable distance. Always with the same devastating result.

With every subsequent failure, something splintered inside him. His hope was shattering like old glass. *Why don’t they know? The records aren’t mistaken!* The despair was choking him. No sooner did he arrive back at the inner camp than he sank onto a simple wooden bench next to the well. His batteries felt empty, all energy used up.

The records are false. There’s no first Thort on Rofus. Not at the time of the great battle for the capital, and maybe not after that. Lies. All lies.

“What do we have here, then?” came a derisive voice that made Lossoshér look up. It sounded familiar to him, and he recognized the speaker at once. Mar-Ton and three other soldiers were standing in front of him, broad-legged. “An old man reaping the benefits of our healing station. A tired Gorchoo who wants to hide away in our camp.”

Lossoshér looked at Mar-Ton, who was no longer wearing a camouflage suit. Without the helmet, his lumpen head stood out even more. The yellow cloth around his forehead emphasized the angular shape. “I just wanted a moment’s break,” he groaned dejectedly. Were he among civilized Ferrons, he’d have given this

brazen young man a piece of his mind and condemned him to several hours of respect work in the communal buildings. But on this bench, in this era, he was fair game. He couldn't let himself be provoked. Mar-Ton and his companions looked the types to go seeking trouble.

The Ferron on his left had the widest mouth he'd never seen on a woman. It seemed to be trying to devour her blue face. The two Ferrons on his right couldn't have been more different apart from their copper-colored hair and enamel-like blue skin. One had a petite frame and was almost as tall as Lossohér, while the other was short and compact like Chaktor. A bulging scar ran across the latter's nose. He looked like someone who enjoyed a fight.

"A break," Mar-Ton repeated. "You can have that when you're dead, old man. Everyone has to do their part, and you blew yours off. When the battle comes, will you leave us hanging just like you did with peeling duty?"

Lossoshér stood up. "I don't want any trouble. I'll go back in."

Surprised, Mar-Ton made way for him. "A wise decision."

Relieved, Lossoshér was about to leave the group behind him when a hand grabbed him on the shoulder and spun him around. He cried out in shock, felt himself about the fall, saw the female soldier's venomous face, and grasped for something to hold on to.

Mar-Ton leaned towards him. Lossoshér recognized compassion in his eyes.

"Did you have to do that?" Mar-Ton shouted at the wide-mouthed woman.

With one hand, Lossoshér reached for the cloth around Mar-Ton's head, swaying heavily like a Syru addict. His hand brushed along Mar-Ton's forehead and felt something soft. Under the material wasn't a smooth forehead, but a hollow that yielded under pressure.

This can't be! Lossoshér rallied himself as adrenaline surged

through him. This discovery made everything else irrelevant. *I have to know if Mar-Ton is hiding it.*

It wasn't too difficult to keep acting unsteady on his feet. Again he grasped at the bandana. This time he held on tightly. As he fell, he pulled the cloth with him until it came away from Mar-Ton's head.

"What is that?" the wide-mouthed one asked, bewildered. "Guall, what you have there, it's..." She fell silent.

With great effort, Lossoshér propped himself up into a sitting position. Above him, Mar-Ton stood with his legs apart, his whole body trembling. Where the bandana had been sitting, a third eye was now visible. The lid was closed over it and looked strangely dull.

"Guall?" Lossoshér asked. "You... You're called Guall?"

"That's still *Mar-Ton* Guall to you, Dradesires!"

"You're the one." Moved, Lossoshér straightened up, the sight of the third eye sending new strength coursing through his body. Even the anger on Guall's face couldn't intimidate him. "Guall. That's the name from the legends. You're the first Thort!"

Guall stared at him, filled with hate. "Why did you do that? For two years, everything was going fine! Now you've shown everyone that I'm disfigured!" In a rage, he turned and walked away with quick steps.

Lossoshér watched him go as if he'd been struck in the face. This was supposed to be the first Thort? This short-tempered young man? He had to be. No one other than the Thort had a third eye.

For a while after that, Lossoshér sat by the well, staring after Mar-Ton Guall.

Perry Rhodan

Rhodan was leaning heavily against the wall of a building and breathing in the rain-soaked air. The misery of the camp sank over him like a dark cloth. Ninety years of war. He struggled to even imagine it. Sure, the war may have briefly died down on occasion before flaring up again somewhere else, but it still remained ghastly and incomprehensible how long and hard the Ferrons had fought against one another in their own system. What almost shook him even more was the way they viewed their terrible situation. How *normal* it was to them.

Their bone towers are towers made from the remains of comrades, nine meters high. It's absolutely insane. You can see them towering into the sky from the edge of the camp.

Nearby, he heard a group of Dradisires singing buoyantly, exuberantly, as if they weren't about to go into battle: "Dead, dead, super dead, that's my cry for evermore. Dead, dead, super dead, always standing at death's door. Being soldiers is the best—shot and beaten, missing legs. Always fighting in this war, we'll drag ourselves along the floor."

The words burned themselves into his memory.

He'd discovered little about Thora, Sue, and Tschubai. However, he did now know the times when the Dradesires' camp was guarded less strictly. Under cover of darkness, escape might be possible. Most didn't attempt it. Where were they supposed to go? They didn't seem to see themselves as prisoners, but quite the opposite—as living under Nerlan's protection.

"They really believe that fat blue toad is their benevolent father figure," Bull had caustically observed before they'd split up and Bull had joined a group of Dradesires for some communal Syru chewing to get more information.

Rhodan recoiled at the thought of putting the mildly intoxicating

Syru nuts into his mouth. He wanted to stay in his right mind.

He slowly swept his gaze across the ruins. In some places, angular metal containers were filled with glowing Jaris rods, which looked like stick-shaped pieces of coal. Men and women in gray uniforms clustered around the pools, laughing and chatting as if they were at a town fair.

A Ferron woman was walking between the pools at a quick pace. Her long hair bobbed up and down with every step. Rhodan immediately recognized her from her energetic gait. *Rukaar.* He hurried over to the commander. Perhaps he'd get more information from her; she did belong to the command branch, after all.

"Sir-Lan Rukaar," he said, using her official title. "May I..." He faltered. In the fading light of Vega, he could clearly see how battered her face looked. One eye was black and puffy, and her nose was swollen too. "You've hurt yourself."

"What does that have to do with you, Dradesires?"

She sped onwards, but Rhodan wasn't about to give up that easily. He followed her with brisk steps. "I want to talk to you."

"Leave me alone or I'll wrap you in barbed wire."

Rhodan gulped, but didn't let himself be dissuaded. Rukaar's words were in stark contrast to the sense he got from her. "I want to help you," he said firmly.

She stopped and turned to face him. Disbelief showed in her blue eyes. "Help me? A piece of dead meat wants to help me?"

"You're dismissive because you've never known Ferrons to take care of each other. I had the good fortune of growing up in a relatively peaceful area. For us, it's normal to be there for one another."

The corner of her mouth twitched. For a moment, Rhodan thought she was about to burst out laughing. Darkly, he remembered the religious groups who had repeatedly sent pairs of representatives to stand outside the door of his parents' house in

Connecticut, aiming to convert them to the one true faith. He sounded just like that, didn't he? What exactly was he trying to do here? Show a person who only knew war and mistrust that it could be different? He might as well tell the Fantan about the legal basis of private property in the United States.

I'll never give in, he swore to himself. *Never!* Images suddenly rose up inside him. The vision that had entranced him on Gol returned. For a few moments, Rhodan believed he was far away, in space, hurtling towards the planet that an unknown man had split down the middle. And as if from the far distance, he again heard the voice that had called to him: "Come, Perry Rhodan! I need you!"

No, I can't give up! I will find Crest—and the unknown person who called to me!

It didn't escape Rukaar's notice that something was going on inside of him. Her shoulders sank; she visibly relaxed. Briefly, her gaze swept across the square. They were standing alone. "You really are different, Rhodan. I used to be like that too, before. Nerlan and I..." She touched her swollen nose. "We believed that if we rose up and became commanders, we could end the war. There's a legend of the time of peace that a chosen one will bring. We thought we were chosen. Our mother was a great commander."

"*Your* mother? The two of you?" Rhodan echoed. Their faces bore no resemblance that he could have pointed to. "You're siblings?"

"Half-siblings. Conceived through rape, like so many. We wanted to make things better. And now look at us. There's no hope. We've bombed ourselves into the abyss and no one's coming to save us. Maybe it's no more than we deserve."

"I don't believe that, Rukaar. You can still help yourselves."

Her face hardened. She turned away, her lips narrow lines. "I shouldn't be speaking with dead meat."

Rhodan could practically see the walls as she built them up around herself. He didn't blame her for it. Nor did he let the

expression “dead meat” get to him. It was too clear how ardently she was trying to keep her distance to protect herself from him.

“I’ll stop bothering you, Rukaar. Just one more question. Do you know anything about my companions?” Now Rhodan had come to his real concern.

Rukaar didn’t look at him. “They belong to Nerlan. He’ll do whatever he wants with them. If they don’t serve him, they’ll die.”

Durhai Nerlan

Damn Rukaar. Maybe there’ll be some opportunity to dispose of her during the battle. Her insubordination is undermining the others’ morale. Nerlan blinked as if this could wipe away the intrusive thoughts. The worst was his armpit, which was itching pathetically again, as if Rukaar’s disobedience had unleashed new torment in the worst of his current pus lesions.

He fixed his gaze on the white-haired one. It was rare to see a woman so tall. He liked her proportions and her red eyes that revealed inner fire. The projectile weapon lay heavy in his hand. It would be regrettable to have to shoot her.

“Well, white-hair? Will you accompany me to my quarters or not?”

She raised her head. Nerlan was certain that she not only saw the weapon, but also knew full well what was in store for her. In contrast to others, she had courage. He respected that. For her, there was no thought of stalling for time. She made a decision.

“I’d never even consider it.”

Nerlan raised his hand and slowly stepped closer. “You know what that means. Do you really want to end your life?”

“I am no one’s handmaid.”

The girl chimed in. “Thora, please, don’t do this. It’s not worth

it.”

The white-haired woman didn’t look at the child. “Everyone has to decide for themselves. I know what I want. And what I don’t want.” She stood completely still, her eyelids lowered as if she were meditating.

Nerlan felt anger boiling up inside him. Would she have freely given herself to him if he had been as muscle-bound and sweet-smelling as the black dog? Was it his exterior that she found so repellent? In the end, he wasn’t demanding a lot from her. Just a little amusement and distraction. He had no intention of torturing her. What right did she have to refuse him? Did she think she was something special because of her height? It rankled him that she loomed over him by a handspan.

“Fine, then. Everyone has to decide for themselves—isn’t that right?” he said bitterly, aiming at her jugular. In his head, he counted to three.

At two, the woman appeared to explode before him. Nerlan cried out as a full-force kick hit his wrist and the pistol flew out of his hand. White-hair followed up immediately, aiming her leg at his chin. He threw himself backwards, only barely avoiding the strike. Had her hands not been bound, she could have presented a serious danger to him. He’d never seen a combat technique like that before. It wasn’t taught among his soldiers.

His guards ran over from the shaft. Cheron and Berag grabbed the woman, kicking her legs and pressing her to the floor, where Soor and Trabil put fetters on her feet. She thrashed around on the carpet.

Nerlan picked up the weapon and swung it around.

“No!” The child put herself in front of white-hair. Her eyes showed a resoluteness that Nerlan found impressive. “Please, mighty Durhai, take me instead!”

“Your turn will come tomorrow. Out of the way.”

The little one looked up at him bravely. “I most humbly suggest that you take me and give Thora a night to think over what she really wants.”

White-hair snorted. Although Nerlan had a desire to shoot the ferocious woman, the child’s confidence made an impression on him. “And why should I be satisfied with second best?”

She didn’t let herself be intimidated by his contemptuous words. On the contrary; she even seemed to grow. “I’m the best you’ve ever had, Durhai. You just don’t know it yet. Let me show you what I can do, and I swear you won’t regret it.”

This defiantly thrust-out chin. The delicate little fists that had surely never pinned anyone to the ground. Nerlan laughed. They were unarticulated sounds that hardly any Ferron would have recognized as laughter.

“Very well, young lady. Show me.” He indicated the way to his quarters. “After you.”

Sue Mirafiore

She walked ahead as purposefully as if she knew the way. She steered toward a fan-like weaving and pushed it aside; Nerlan’s gaze had revealed that an entrance must lie behind it. In fact, she encountered metal. A heavy security door loomed before her.

A wild jumble of thoughts circled around inside her. Sue had a bold, dangerous plan that would place her and Thora into a better situation. It was all resting on her.

Hold your nerve, Sue, she told herself. *Be like Reg and Perry. Imagine you’re as cool as that. Nerlan doesn’t know about what’s inside you. He only sees you from the outside. Think of the Fantan. You know how to put on a good show.*

Her heart was racing; sweat formed under her clothes. She was happy that the sickly scent akin to moldy oranges overpowered

everything else. Admittedly, she didn't know how good Ferrons' sense of smell was, but she was sure she was exuding fear with every step. She closed her eyes for a moment and pictured the garden at the shelter, where she'd given her acrobatic performances. John was standing by the fence, smiling at her. The memory gave her strength.

Sue had always been courageous—always special. But what she was doing at this moment felt like the greatest performance of them all. Even the Fantan hadn't instilled fear in her the way Nerlan did. Regardless, she'd stay strong. For Reg. For Thora and the others. And for herself.

Nerlan pushed past her and activated a handwheel by the door. The metal swung to the side, opening the path.

Sue stepped into a magnificent room with a raised surface of maybe ten meters by ten with many strange-looking devices sitting on it. Orange fur that reminded Sue of the Galanés spanned the shape. Was it supposed to be a bed? More like a playground, probably. Sue gulped. The intimate closeness with Nerlan disturbed her.

Nerlan's voice sounded venomous. "What now, young lady? What do you have to offer that I apparently haven't seen before?"

She screwed up all her courage, turned to him, and forced herself to smile. Showtime. "I ask you to please take your clothes off, Durhai. Then I'll show you."

Nerlan willingly obeyed. As he disrobed, he didn't take his eyes off of Sue. She found it difficult not to stare at Nerlan's member, even if it was hardly distinguishable underneath the rolls of fat. It looked tiny in relation to his body, and she very much hoped not to get acquainted with it any other way.

"Lie down, please." Sue gestured towards the soft surface. Nerlan was no doubt expecting sexual techniques from her. What she had to offer was far, far more than that.

Nerlan lay down in front of her on the fur. "Now what?"

Sue shifted closer. It took her quite some effort. The naked blue body was covered all over with pimples and scars, and it stank. Scabs and pus as far as the eye could see. It had to be pure torture. Was this why Nerlan had become such a monster—because he was so unwell? Sue shook her head and recalled how he had kicked Rukaar in the face. There was no excusing his behavior.

After a moment's consideration, she chose an affected area under his armpit which was not only particularly large, but had also burst open and partly scabbed over.

"Give me a little time," she asked, and laid her hands over the area.

Nerlan froze up. He wanted to pull away from her—Sue sensed it clearly—but then what she was doing took effect.

"What are you doing there?" he asked, alarmed.

"How does it feel, Durhai?"

He remained silent for a while. "Astonishingly good. It's stopped itching. Is this some kind of trick?"

Sue kept working. She delved into his skin, making the damage recede and the cells heal, until the skin looked as delicate as a baby's.

Nerlan sat up and touched the area on his body with one hand. "How did you do that?"

"It's my gift. I can affect cells and regenerate them."

"Then heal me."

Sue breathed in deeply. The fear reached a new apex. "I will. I'll turn you into Nerlan the Beautiful, with skin softer and more fragrant than anyone has ever had. But I want something in return."

"What?"

"You won't touch me or Thora, Durhai. You can give your

soldiers and commanders whatever explanation you want, but you'll never do it. Aside from that, you'll bring our friends to us."

Nerlan tilted his head and looked at her with tiny, malicious eyes. "And why shouldn't I simply torture you until you do what I want?"

"Because you know that I have the choice just like everyone else. You can kill me, but you won't force me."

"I understand. Let's say I do what you want, young lady. Am I supposed to let you go after that? I'd have to be insane."

Sue thought of Tschubai, who could teleport them away. "No, you don't have to do that. We'll gladly serve Nerlan the Beautiful. If I can give similar aid to my friend, Ras, he'll fight right on the front line for you, guaranteed. I just can't do it all at once. It'll take a few days, maybe two weeks in total. My powers have limits."

"Understood. How would you feel about giving me another test of your abilities? Then I'll take a night to think about your conditions, young lady."

7.

The First Thort

Rofus

One day before the battle for Remanor

Rhodan hadn't enjoyed more than two hours' sleep. He, Bull, and Chaktor were taking turns observing the Dradesires' inner camp. They'd sought out a resting spot in a ruin close to the rolling shutter. According to Rhodan's information, security should actually have been reduced during the night, but so far they'd had no luck.

"Do you think they're making a bigger fuss than usual because we're here?" Bull asked sullenly, glanced over at the four armed Ferrons. "I can't shake the feeling that that fat blue toad has doubled the guard. We're being watched from all sides, Perry. Those four there are just the tip of the iceberg."

"Nerlan doesn't trust us," Rhodan agreed. "He's not stupid. I'm sure he assumes we want to free the others."

"We don't just *want* to. We're *going* to," Bull said resolutely. "I can't even think about sleeping anyway. This damn cold is going to give me a bladder infection."

Despite their miserable circumstances, Rhodan suppressed a smirk. Reginald Bull was the least likely to get ill out of all of them. His constitution was second to none, and Bull knew it. His friend was complaining just to vent some steam.

Bull pulled a grim face. "Man, as much as I can't stand him and his big mouth, I wish we had that Mousebeaver vampire thing with us. Gucky would be a big help right now."

Rhodan had turned down Gucky's offer to accompany them. True, he rated the Ilt's abilities enormously highly—his para-gifts were phenomenal—but he still didn't have unconditional trust in

the alien being. “We’ll manage it on our own. Sue will definitely find a chance to help Ras.”

Bull looked dubious, but he didn’t say anything to the contrary. He briefly looked over at Lossoshér. Rhodan followed his gaze. The transmitter guardian was lying by a warming bowl under several ragged blankets. He wouldn’t sleep for much longer. Since coming back to them, he’d hardly been able to calm down.

“What do you think about this Thort business?” Rhodan asked quietly.

Bull gave a tortured sigh. “I wish I knew. To me, Lossoshér’s talking just as crazy as Kerlon did in his report. On the one hand, I think it’s a load of bullshit, but on the other hand…why not? Maybe that Guall guy really is the first Thort. Kerlon mentioned that name too, right? Only question is what we’re supposed to do about it. Are we the Lightbringers now after all?”

Rhodan noticed a measure of resignation in Bull that didn’t suit him. After this depressing day, he could hardly blame him. Their inquiries about Crest had amounted to nothing. No one with white or pale blond hair had suddenly appeared. No one in the camp knew anything about Crest’s companions either, and a Topsidan would have stood out to them. On top of that were the nagging worries about Sue and Thora, which wouldn’t give them peace. Knowing that they were in Nerlan’s clutches made Rhodan feel sick.

“There!” Bull hissed, indicating that he was anything but resigned. “Changing of the guard. Perry, this is our chance!” He leaped up, ready to start running.

Rhodan immediately got to his feet and held him back by the arm. “No. There are more of them.” He indicated two more soldiers standing guard in the shadow of a building wall.

“Ugh, dammit.” Bull lowered his head, like his namesake ready to charge. “They can’t be paying attention *all* the time.”

Rhodan saw movement out of the corner of his eye and whirled around. Bull followed.

“What the—” Bull began.

Rhodan was already reacting. He took a leap towards the figure bending over Lossohér with a knife in his hand. Bull was close behind him.

“Hey!” he cried, grabbing the stranger. “What’s going on here? Are you trying to rob him?” He’d heard about muggings in the camp.

The Ferron dodged back and out of the way, distancing himself from Lossoshér.

Lossoshér sleepily sat up, awoken by Rhodan’s exclamation. His gaze fell on the attacker. “You,” he said, reverent. “It’s you. You’ve come to me!”

The loud statement finally pulled Chaktor out of his slumber on the other side of the warming bowl. Alarmed, the Ferron astronaut leaped to his feet.

“Quiet!” hissed the newcomer with a yellow cloth around his forehead. “Do you want to wake up the whole camp?”

Worried, Rhodan glanced at the knife in the blue-skinned man’s hand. “What do you want? Are you trying to kill him?”

“By all the bleaching plants, no.” Guall put the knife away in his chest strap and raised both arms as if to give his words more impact. “I want to talk.”

With some effort, Lossoshér sat fully upright. “Of course, my lord. Naturally. You wish to discover more about your purpose. The third eye will lead the Ferrons into the light. You will end the Dark Age and—”

“Shut your trap, you old fool!” Guall hissed. Rhodan was afraid he’d hit the old man. “I’m not a Thort or any other kind of savior. I’m a freak of nature, do you understand? I’ve made it a long way with Nerlan because he doesn’t know about my third eye. He can never find out! You have to keep your mouths shut—otherwise I’m screwed. Nerlan collects exotic curiosities for his Nakuur. I don’t

want to end up there. I wouldn't make a good harem lady."

"But my lord," Lossoshér objected, "you have to follow the call of destiny. Doesn't your eye show you the way?"

Guall grimaced. "Shut up about the eye already. If I could, I'd cut the damn thing out!"

"But my lord—"

"Leave it," Chaktor interrupted. "Lossoshér, you're only making it worse. You're overwhelming him. Shut your mouth!"

Lossoshér looked as though he wanted to lunge at Chaktor. "You doubter, Chaktor! Don't you see the signs?! You small-minded—"

"Lossoshér!" Rhodan grabbed his arm. "That's enough. Pull yourself together."

"Indeed," Guall agreed. He touched the yellow headband. "That *is* enough. Leave me in peace. I have connections. If one of you talks, I'll have you woven into the fence."

"My lord!" Lossoshér implored, throwing himself to his knees before Guall. "Please don't go! You're the one! You must lead us to the light!"

Guall turned away and disappeared into the night, ignoring Lossoshér's pleas.

Gray drizzle set in just in time for Vega to rise, underlining the bleakness of the environment. Rhodan felt tired and unfocused as he waited at the edge of the ruins alongside Bull and the others, looking for a chance to leave the inner compound. All night long, no escape opportunity had presented itself. The rolling shutter in the barbed wire fence was meticulously guarded.

Lossoshér looked torpid, Chaktor subliminally despairing. Would they somehow make it to the transmitter during the conflict? Without Tschubai, their chances were slim. Especially since none of them wanted to leave the others behind.

“Time’s up,” Bull said in a decisive tone. “We have to act, even if it means we die. Perry, let’s subdue two of the guards, take their weapons, and try to make a break for it.”

“That’s madness,” Chaktor objected. “They’ll have us over a barrel before we even reach the gate.”

“To hell with it!” Bull leaped up. “I can’t stand waiting around anymore!”

“We’ll do it another way,” Rhodan curtly asserted. During the long waiting period, he’d forged several plans and painstakingly gone over them in his mind until he’d figured out the most promising one. “Yesterday, Lossoshér was taken out of the inner camp when he had a fainting spell. Chaktor and Bull, you’ll pretend to collapse, and we’ll try to get out along with you. If we’re not brought outside too, you’ll have to—” He paused as the rolling shutter opened. Rukaar and six soldiers entered the inner camp. Not for the first time, Rhodan wondered if her companions were also her husbands. “Rukaar,” he said quietly, making the others’ aware.

Rhodan slowly turned towards the commander. The swellings on her face had gotten even worse. What had been bluish black in the evening now fluoresced in a dark shade of violet. Her right cheek was three times its usual size, bulging over her cheekbone. Had Rukaar come to give a reckoning for the prior evening? Rhodan had seen behind her facade. Seen the commander who was sick of her leader and yearned for peace.

“Good morning,” he greeted her amiably, even though his chest felt uncomfortably tight.

Rukaar came closer on her own, the soldiers maintaining a five-meter distance. “Who says there’s anything good about it, pale-skin?”

Rhodan’s bad feeling grew stronger. He stepped forward. “What do you want, Sir-Land Rukaar?”

“Nerlan sent me. I’m supposed to escort you to his Nakuur.”

Rhodan and Bull exchanged a look of surprise. Presumably, Thora, Sue, and Ras were waiting in the Nakuur. “We’ll gladly come with you,” Rhodan assured her.

Rukaar didn’t speak a single word more. She didn’t even give an explanation. Her posture looked forbidding; she avoided Rhodan’s questioning looks.

Silently, they gathered up their meager belongings and followed the commander and soldiers through the camp. After a short journey in a jeep-like vehicle, they reached an intact building of plain construction in the same rust-red shade that had stood out to Rhodan just after their arrival. Like the inner camp, it was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence with entry afforded by a rolling shutter. Four metal towers with spotlights on the upper platforms gave the facility the charm of a high-security prison. Rhodan noticed several chained-up six-legged animals at least four meters tall emitting rumbling sounds. They each had three heads and ugly faces with sharp teeth. *Like Cerberus, the hellhound. Did these maniacs breed these specifically for the war?*

“Last stop,” Rukaar said mockingly. “Very few ever come out again. However, I think Nerlan will make an exception for you. We’ll need everyone in the battle tomorrow.”

They passed a security hatch. Alongside armed soldiers, Rhodan saw robots in service for the first time. Their builds looked clunky and primitive, but deadly nonetheless. Several weapon barrels jutted out of hulls a meter and a half tall.

A corpulent Ferron with numerous red braids picked them up and led them inside the Nakuur. In contrast to the soldiers, his clothing was multicolored and looked like an oversized shawl that he’d rolled downhill in. His blue feet, clad in sandals of a sort, pattered against the concrete floor.

From the inside, the building seemed enormous. They changed direction many times as they walked. Rhodan carefully memorized the way, although it took some concentration. They arrived at a horseshoe-shaped entrance embedded in a golden wall. Inside the archway was a red plastic wall with pull handles.

“Go on,” said the Ferron, who had introduced himself as Far-Luff, organizational manager of the Nakuur. “Get in touch if you feel neglected by Nerlan. I can put in a good word for you anytime.”

Bull grimaced as if he’d bitten into an unpeeled Wukas tuber. “Pigs are more likely to fly, my good man.”

Far-Luff made a puzzling motion with his legs that looked as if he were about to dance. Was this an expression of his indifference? “Just get in touch if there are any problems.” He pulled open the door in the archway.

Rhodan saw Sue and Thora standing in a clean, simple room. Apart from two low beds and a knee-high table, the room was empty. Worried, Rhodan looked intently at both women, but he couldn’t perceive any injuries. *On the outside, at least, they look like they’re doing fine.*

“Reg!” Sue ran over to Bull and wrapped her arms around him.

Thora followed her, reserved like an English lady who would never dream of running. Her face showed her relief. For a moment, she stood still in front of Rhodan, then she moved her hands just a little.

Rhodan pulled her close to him. “I’m so glad you’re alive. Are you...” He hesitated. “Hurt?”

Thora returned the embrace. “No,” she said softly. “Sue made a deal with Nerlan. She’s healing him, and in return he won’t lay a finger on us.” She released herself from him. There was a smile on her face that made her even more beautiful.

Rhodan regretted having to let her go. “Clever Sue,” he said softly. He refrained from saying anything else. They were probably being overheard.

“Perry!” Sue hugged him too.

Her joviality moved Rhodan; he held her tightly. When he let her go, his gaze fell on one of the square beds, three meters by three, on

which a familiar form rested. “Ras,” he gasped. “How’s he doing?”

“His healing’s been given a nudge,” Sue reported proudly. Her cheeks reddened. “Tomorrow, he’ll be ready for action.” She winked at Rhodan to show him that she wasn’t referring just to the oncoming battle, but to their escape.

This young woman never stops surprising me. Rhodan gave Sue a smile. He felt like a spacecraft-sized weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Not only were the two women safe, but Ras was also alive and getting better. That was more than he’d dared to hope. “Thanks! You’ve done amazingly, Sue.” He was going to say more, but he stopped short when he heard shouting through the open door.

“Let me go, you sick Gorchoos!”

“Take him down!” another voice bellowed. “On the floor with him, I told you!”

Rhodan hurried to the archway and peered into the corridor. He knew the first speaker. “Guall,” he murmured.

“The Thort?” Lossoshér stumbled up next to Rhodan. The others followed.

They watched as Guall tried to flee. A guard brutally struck him in the back with a baton, knocking him over. Guall yelled as he plummeted. Two more guards in blue and white uniforms pressed him into the floor.

“Stop!” Lossoshér bellowed. The transmitter guardian ran over to the soldiers, who actually let go of Guall.

The three-eyed Ferron lumbered to his feet. Blood clung to his lips. “You!” he cried, pointing accusingly at Lossoshér. “This is all your fault! I’m only in this awful place because of you!” He lunged at Lossoshér and grabbed him by the throat.

Lossoshér choked. “But...my lord...”

Rhodan and Bull interrupted. With a hard grip under the nose,

Rhodan forced the burly Ferron to pull his head back and let Lossoshér go. Guall then elbowed Rhodan in the stomach, leaving him gasping for breath.

The two guards came to help him, throwing Guall to the floor again and hitting him hard on the head. Their copper-red shocks of hair fell over the fallen one.

"No!" Lossoshér screeched. "Don't hurt him! He's chosen!" He tried to intervene again, gripping the uniform sleeve of the soldier about to strike. The soldier effortlessly brushed him off.

The other soldier struck Guall's head with a baton. Guall didn't resist any further.

"That's enough," Rhodan said with all the authority he could muster. The soldier actually did stop hitting Guall and stared at him, puzzled. "Go," Rhodan said sharply. "We'll take care of him."

The two guards threw a glance at each other. They held their batons indecisively in their hands. "All right," said the shorter soldier with narrowed eyes. "That's fine with me. But make sure he keeps his feet still. We don't want any more trouble." They withdrew.

Rhodan watched them go with relief. "Bring Guall into the room and close the door."

By now, at least twenty Ferrons of various skin colors were standing in the corridor gawking at the scene. Thora and Chaktor grabbed Guall under the arms and dragged him along. They laid him next to Tschubai on the low bed.

Rhodan stepped up close to him. Guall's face had received two blows; the lid of his third eye was bleeding. "Sue, I know you've already done a lot, but would you be able to see to Guall?"

"Please, Sue," Lossoshér begged, "help him!"

Hesitantly, Sue came nearer. "My strength is exhausted," she said quietly.

Rhodan was relatively sure that she wasn't just acting for a potential camera. She'd certainly already used her gift for Nerlan and Tschubai. Nonetheless, she sat down next to the unconscious Ferron and held her finger in the air ten centimeters above his eye as if scanning Guall's injury with her palm. Like in slow motion, she laid her hands on him. Guall's face twitched. Cautiously, Rhodan held one of the injured man's arms down and Bull the other so that he couldn't hit Sue in fright.

Sue was sitting completely motionless. Not a single muscle moved on her face. A few minutes passed. Although there was nothing visibly spectacular in her actions, a prickling ran under Rhodan's spine. He could clearly see the swellings subsiding.

Then it took effect in Guall's face. The muscles tensed and released; the lid of the third eye abruptly opened.

Instinctively, Rhodan leaned back little. While the two lower eyes remained closed, the third eye stared at him. It had a blue color like the snow in the Ferron mountain ranges, quite unlike the pair of coppery brown eyes below. White branches ran through the iris.

To Rhodan, the iris looked like faded chalcedony. He thought about how far away the quartz mineral from Earth was at this moment and yet how much it resembled the color of Ferron snow.

The eye's gaze looked sharp and penetrating, as if it could pierce through walls like a mutant might. At the same time, it was distanced, like the gaze of an old sage who had seen too much suffering. Rhodan found it difficult to sum up his impression in words. *It's as though this third eye can see everything. It doesn't just see me, Sue, Thora, Bull, Chaktor, Lossoshér, Ras... It sees the room and far beyond it, into the distance, or...even farther?*

Rhodan blinked and shook his head. The legends about the Thort were influencing him. He couldn't know if this third eye really was seeing any more than the other two.

Sue sank forward. Bull let go of Guall and took hold of her. "Sue, are you all right?"

“Yeah,” she murmured weakly. “I’m so tired.” She closed her eyes, and her breath grew deep and detached. She fell asleep in Bull’s arms.

Guall, on the other hand, began to stir. Faltering, he opened his lower eyes and looked around. “What did you do to me?” He touched the chalcedony-blue eye.

“How do you feel, my lord?” Lossoshér asked obsequiously.

“I want to die.” Guall’s voice sounded quiet. He looked at Tschubai. “I hate this war. I hate everything in this camp. Every day, I betray myself a little more, dying like a plant in the snow, except that spring never comes...” He fell silent and observed Rhodan with all three eyes.

A shiver ran through Rhodan. “You speak very openly, Guall. I thank you for that.”

Guall smiled. It was the first time Rhodan had seen this emotion on a Ferron from this time period. “I’m not how I always acted, you know?” He gestured towards Tschubai. “I wouldn’t have shot this one either. We all play a role on this dark stage. But mine has just changed. Sue Mirafiore rewrote the script.”

Rhodan furrowed his brow. “How do you know she’s called Sue Mirafiore?”

Guall’s smile took on an enigmatic flavor. “Maybe because you just told me.” He sat up and looked at the sleeping Sue. “My role among murderers ends this very hour, Perry Rhodan.”

Bull opened his mouth. “Perry, he’s doing it again! How does he know your first name? What kind of gift is that? Is he reading our thoughts?”

Rhodan hesitated a moment, then grinned. “I think I understand you, Guall.”

“You really are the one,” Lossoshér whispered, moved. “You’re the first Thort. You have the *sight* and will bring peace.”

Rhodan looked fixedly at Guall. “Will you help us, Guall? Help yourself and your people?”

Guall stood up like a man taking his first steps after a long illness. He turned away from Rhodan. “I already told you. I just want to die. To be at peace. But I won’t die. I’ll help you, Perry Rhodan, and my people. Not because I plan to, but because I know it’s going to happen.”

8.

Imprisoned

Somewhere in the USA

September 18, 2036

The ground was cold; it stank of rot and refuse. Gucky opened his eyes. An unpleasant draft of air hit his retinas. He hurriedly closed his lids again and thought of what he'd seen in the brief, initial glimpse. Metal bars with a long hallway beyond them. Tiles on all the walls.

This doesn't look like an apartment. Didn't tiles belong on the floor? In this passageway they were everywhere apart from the ceiling, which was made of wood. Glaring light shone from a tube-shaped ceiling lamp, illuminating a dirty floor. Some places were stained dark red, like dried blood.

Gucky shook himself, which made a quiet jangling sound. He felt an unpleasant sensation around his neck. Something heavy was closing him in, pressing against his larynx and spine. *A collar. How dare they.* From it hung a metal chain anchored to the wall.

That Monk guy had kidnapped him and locked him up. With horror, Gucky remembered the moment the tall man with a cross hanging from his neck had pulled the trigger. Evidently, he had fired a stun round. Gucky's shoulder hurt where it had struck him.

That small-ears caught me off guard. But you can't keep a Gucky tied down!

Gucky composed himself, imagined an open space not far from the building, and jumped. He opened his eyes, expecting to see a field or a flower-filled meadow around him—and instead saw the metal bars, the glaring light, the dirty floor, the red splotches. Fear crept into his chest. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. *What the hell's going on? That always works!* Nervously, he blinked

and tried again—with the same result.

Gucky stayed where he was. Several human swear words occurred to him that he'd learned from Reginald Bull. His skull throbbed, and his eyes hurt from more than just the air draft. A driving ache made itself known inside his head and took hold of his optic nerves. The bars turned blurry before him. Why was he so weak?

It has to be a side effect of being stunned, he reassured himself. *Even the Savior of the Universe can be weakened by something like that.*

Exhausted, he relaxed his muscles. It appeared he was stuck in this cage until he recovered his strength. He looked along the hallway again. There was an open mezzanine floor under the roof on one side, and he could see yellow bales in it. His cell was the middle one of three, with the other two appearing to be empty. Straw lay on the ground beneath him. Hopefully there weren't any fleas, or worse. Just the thought made his fur start to itch. He'd read that fleas could transmit terrible diseases. Who knew whether his biology was susceptible to those or not?

Gucky suppressed the disquieting thoughts, sat up, focused, and activated his telepathic abilities. The headache grew stronger, but he didn't let up in his efforts. Almost straight away, he picked up muddled thoughts. There were a lot of people around him, he was sure of that. A mysterious mixture of fear and anger formed the core mood. Tense, Gucky tried to read individual thoughts to discover the background of those feelings, but he didn't manage it.

Wearily, he let himself sink into the straw. What was he supposed to do? As far as he could tell, he had no choice but to keep playing the animal. No doubt, he'd be feeling better soon, and his powers would return with all their usual pizzazz. Then he could escape and make this Monk take a long flight around in the air. He thought again about the barrel Monk had aimed at him. The rising anger made the hair on his cheeks twitch. *Monk'll fly higher than anyone ever before, and at the highest point, I'll drop him.*

Drained now, Gucky fell into an uneasy sleep. The unfamiliar environment and uncertainty as to what would happen were

pressing on him.

When he woke up, he sensed that he wasn't alone. He jerked his head up, propped himself up on his arms, and quickly slid backwards to avoid making himself suspicious.

Right in front of his cage stood the tall, black-clad man with the open leather jacket. Monk had his arms crossed in front of his chest and was staring at Gucky with those dead eyes. No word crossed his lips, and he showed not the slightest sign of moving. Like a demon out of human myths, he loomed in the glaring light, a dark shadow amid dirty white. This time, he was wearing a different black top with a V-shaped neckline. Gucky could see his smoothly shaved chest below his collarbones. The suffering man was emblazoned there, burned into wax-white skin.

Gucky found Monk's behavior unnerving. What was that stare supposed to mean? If he'd known more about human body language, maybe he'd have understood. Normally, whenever he was unsure, he could delve into the humans' thoughts. This time, he didn't succeed.

He just wanted to be away from there. His nose was itching horribly. He tried to teleport again and failed. *This is quite enough now. At some point I have to be able to do it again.* Frightened, he felt inside himself. His body had never left him in the lurch like this before. It gnawed at his usual confidence.

Monk stayed standing by the bars for half an hour, upright and rigid like a statue. Then he turned around and left the barn without a word. His facial expression remained a mystery to Gucky.

Again, Gucky spied on the surrounding area telepathically—with the same devastating result. His head hurt like hell, leaving him with no choice but to rest again. The light had begun to impact him. At first, Gucky had thought it an advantage to have a light, and he had been grateful for it. But by now, it had become an instrument of torture. It was never night, which made his body very confused. Drawing new strength through regeneration became impossible. Eventually, he fell into a nervous sleep interspersed with nightmares in which the black-clad Monk hunted him across a

surreal landscape to nail him to a cross with long nails.

A rattling at the bars woke him up. Beyond them stood a tall human female with pale head-fur, blue pants with holes in them, and a pink top. A mouse with round ears was depicted on the material.

The female smiled at him. “Well, boy? You must be awfully hungry, right?” Her voice sounded pleasant, with a singsong quality, and was also like that of a child. However, from her appearance, the human appeared to Gucky to be a grown woman. She had to be at least eighteen, perhaps even older. He couldn’t be more specific than that. He still struggled to guess humans’ ages. The oldest examples had faded head hair and wrinkled faces. The furless face in front of him, on the other hand, was entirely smooth.

The female awkwardly leaned forward, light blue eyes beaming at him. “Betty has something for you. Betty’s good to you.” She shoved a metal bowl filled with an indefinable brown mass through the bars. For safety’s sake, she didn’t use her hand to do it, but her food, which was enclosed in a coarse brown boot.

Gucky was hungry, but this slop took the failings of human cuisine to a new level. *Eurgh, that is disgusting. I’ll never keep it down.* He turned his head and looked away from Betty.

Betty’s voice sounded disappointed. “You don’t want your din-din? It’s a good din-din, yes it is.”

Then eat it yourself, Gucky thought indignantly. *I want french fries. A lot of french fries. And ketchup. And my freedom.*

Gucky’s metal leash was too short to reach Betty or the exit. Instead, he took the chance to try exploring Betty’s thoughts. Again, he was met with failure. He couldn’t spy on Betty; his thought-finger collided with a wall. The fear in him grew. How could even *that* not work?

Betty brought him fresh water, then disappeared again. Despair began to take hold of Gucky. He still hadn’t recovered his strength. This time, it took a long while before he fell asleep. In his dreams,

he floated above blood-smeared tiles and was hunted by a black shadow.

When he woke up, trembling, Monk was standing by the bars and staring hatefully at him without saying a word. Was the black-clad human expecting something specific from him, or did he just want to torture him?

Gucky ignored the man. But the entire time, he considered what Monk might want from him. Was that truly hate in his gaze? Was the small-ears using his eyes to communicate something Gucky didn't understand?

Once Monk was gone again, he intensely felt inside himself—and knew that he still wouldn't be able to get away. Teleporting had become an impossibility. Hopelessness overcame him, offering unwanted company to the despair. Gucky began to nervously beat against the floor with his supportive tail. The soft sound of the tip of his tail hitting the ground was the only noise in the silence. Time passed achingly slowly; Gucky didn't know how many hours went by.

At one point, Betty appeared. She spoke to him like he was an animal and brought him fresh water. She pulled a sorrowful face upon seeing the still-full feeding bowl. "Does doggy not like wet food? Should I bring doggy some dry food instead? But doggy only has one tooth..."

She jabbered on, more to herself than to him. Gucky found it reassuring to hear her voice. At least Betty didn't make him afraid. She hummed a melody as she cleaned the floor. Her naive, friendly manner touched him somehow. Betty didn't strike him as a bad person. Was she a prisoner in this place like he was? Even though he couldn't read her thoughts, it seemed that way to him. There was something out of the ordinary about Betty that markedly distinguished her from other females of her age. Gucky had gotten to know Sue, and Sue seemed significantly more mature than this small-ears in a mouse top.

She's not actually a grown human woman at all. She's like a youth trapped in the body of a mature human. Was Betty mentally stunted,

perhaps? Pondering, Gucky looked at her pale, shaggy hair, which was tied into a disorganized braid. Betty neither wore artificial colors on her face nor sprayed herself with enticing fragrances like Mildred. She looked natural, but in no way elegant. Her light blue eyes looked dreamy and often absent. Her shoulders were always a little drawn up, her back rounded, as if this posture would protect her from the world.

She looks so inexperienced. Like someone who never went beyond her own front door. The impression strengthened the feeling that he was looking at a fellow prisoner.

Several hours passed. Maybe even an entire day. The more times Monk appeared beyond the bars, the more Gucky's fear grew. Why couldn't he jump? Did Monk have something to do with it? The large human gave no indication that he saw more in Gucky than an animal. Was he purposely trying to stoke fear in Gucky? But why? *Maybe the whole time, he's considering whether he'd be better off disposing of me.*

Once Monk was gone again, Gucky choked down a tiny bit of the wet food. The insult to his taste buds was secondary now. He was hungry. While he fought the urge to vomit, he resolved to brave another escape attempt.

Just a few minutes later, he tried to jump—and failed again. Searching for human thoughts, he found several, which were somewhat clearer to understand this time.

Finally, he thought with relief. *An improvement.*

His joy was nipped in the bud when he realized why he could read these thoughts more easily. Someone was deathly afraid! Gucky made an intense effort to reach into those thoughts and found a name: William Tifflorlor! Julian's father! He'd found Julian's father! Was it Julianlor who was in fear for his life? Or someone who was thinking about Julianlor?

His weakness and the accompanying helplessness made Gucky irate. Senseless though it was, he tried with all his might to discover more. His headache exploded; he saw red sparks before his eyes.

Eventually, he couldn't bear the pain any longer and collapsed, whimpering. The sleep that followed, deep and dreamless, seemed a blessing.

Betty's voice woke him up. "Doggy's a sleepyhead, isn't he? Whenever I come, he's having a little nap. And he's still hardly even eating." Her voice sounded loving and accusatory all at once. "That's no good. Doggy's getting thinner and thinner. But look what I've baked for you, doggy." Betty laid several round cookies in the metal bowl and shoved it through the bars towards him with her foot.

Gucky bent down over them like a long-necked dog and cautiously chewed on one. The taste was bearable. Bitter, sure, but also healthy—not just made of artificial substances and gunk. Fries went down significantly better, but could put up with these cookies.

"Yes, good doggy, very good. Betty baked you carrot and banana cookies, together with muesli, flour, and oil. Doggy likes that, doesn't he? Oh, I wish so badly I could go walkies with you out on the fields, but Betty's not allowed. He'd get angry."

Gucky assumed that "he" referred to Monk. He gratefully ate the cookies, not leaving a single crumb.

Betty beamed at him. "Good doggy. If you like them, I'll bring you something extra good tomorrow. You'll love it."

Gucky didn't want to think about spending another day in captivity. At some point, he had to be able to escape and find out whether William Tifflorlor was there too. At least he felt full for the first time in days, and thus immediately a little better.

Sadly, that didn't remain the case for long. Monk appeared almost as soon as Betty left, and Gucky's torment began again. By now, the feeling of fear and helplessness reached magnitudes the Ilt had never known before. Never had his para-gifts abandoned him so astonishingly and inexplicably like this. He just didn't understand. It made his whole body tremble. His tooth began to ache with fear, as if the bone were dissolving.

Eventually, Monk walked off. Gucky again tried to pick up on thoughts, failed, and was left writhing with a terrible headache. This time, he exhausted himself on purpose to get some sleep.

Waking up brought no relief. The bright light mercilessly illuminated his suffering in every detail, never letting up. At this point, Gucky felt his perception filter changing. Every sound was a potential threat and rang in his ears with rising intensity. His eyes had grown inflamed by the draft and hurt; looking was strenuous. Sometimes, specters appeared in the hallway that weren't really there. They danced beyond the cage bars, waved at him, and disappeared. Gucky put it down to his lack of healthy sleep. Despite how much he rested, he never regenerated.

He looked forward to Betty's visits, her warmhearted voice. It was never about what she said, only how she said it. Betty was the only true glimmer of light in this all-too-glaring misery.

During her next appearance, Betty didn't only bring a freshly filled feeding bowl. A wicker basket hung from her arm as well. "I'm here, doggy. Betty's here. And I've brought you something." She lifted a hard, orange root with green leaves out of the basket. "Try that, doggy. Betty likes it. The others say Betty's crazy, but you like the cookies, right? Then you'll like this too." She held the root out to Gucky through the bars so that he could reach it with his mouth.

Gucky courageously bit into it and pulled the orange something-or-other into the cage. His eyes widened. It tasted wonderful! Better than fries. Sweet and delicious. For a few wonderful moments, he forgot the danger he was in. His taste buds opened up and offered him a fireworks display of happy feelings. He gobbled up three of the hard roots, only spitting out the green parts.

Betty laughed. "These are carrots, doggy. Yummy, aren't they? I have more!" Betty lifted a can out of the basket. Emblazoned on a colorful label were the words "Baby Carrots." In a rough gesture, Betty poured the can out, sending fifty or more little carrots tumbling onto the dirty floor.

Gucky froze up. Was he supposed to eat the vegetables off the

floor? To pick out individual carrots from the putrid floor? Why hadn't Betty put them into the bowl? This wasn't like her.

Stunned, Gucky looked at the delicious morsels among the filth. Then one of them moved and rose up into the air. With wide eyes, Gucky watched as the other carrots followed. They arranged themselves, forming letters and ultimately whole words. Gucky's heart leaped into his throat. He read what was written there.

"I know that you're not an animal. Betty Toufry."

Another day passed. Gucky had written off the hope that Mildred and Julian would find him and free him. His hopes rested on Betty Toufry. As naive as the human woman looked, she seemed to have a big heart. He sensed clearly that she wanted to help him. He managed to telekinetically form the straw into words. Every individual stalk felt like an entire car, but Gucky didn't give up. He took the pain in his stride in the hope that Betty knew a way to escape. She, meanwhile, used a new can of carrots. She'd washed the ones from the day before and put them in the bowl before leaving. Even while reading, Gucky was looking forward to the moment when Betty would leave these carrots, too, for him to eat.

After a short greeting, he came straight to a key point for him. He painstakingly formed sentences out of the straw, always forming one word at a time out of a limited number of stalks.

"Why don't you speak aloud? Are we being watched?"

"Mr. Moncadas doesn't like cameras," Betty answered with the carrots. "He thinks they're the devil's eyes. But for safety, he's installed acoustic surveillance. They talked about it in the main building."

Gucky formed a question mark. Betty understood and quickly kept writing.

"We're on a farm. Mr. Moncadas doesn't let any of us out. But I want out. Will you run away with me?"

Gucky's heart beat faster. His incisor flashed with a familiar tingling. "And how. I'll teleport us away."

"You can't. Mr. Moncadas is an antimutant. He blocks our abilities. When he concentrates on us, he can take away any gift nearby."

An antimutant. Gucky gaped. He'd never heard of that before. That explained his weakness, and it deeply disconcerted him. With that, his last hope of escaping on his own power was snuffed out. "Who is this Monk? What does he want with us?"

"He collects people with special gifts. He thinks you're an animal with mutant powers. I don't think he knows what to do with you yet. Mr. Moncadas is crazy. He believes in a Final Judgment. He wants to keep us ready for that. We're supposed to be his army that will serve him. He's gathered fanatics around him, at least fifty. They're holding us captive and shielding the grounds from the outside. The farm is at least fifty miles away from the nearest building. No one comes here of their own free will. Mr. Moncadas is known as a religious nutjob. He believes the arrival of aliens signals the end of all days."

"Don't keep calling him Mr. Moncadas," Gucky corrected Betty with the straw. "The small-ears is scum. Write Monk."

A subtle redness appeared on Betty's face. "You're right. I'm just used to being respectful to the grown-ups."

Gucky was surprised. "You're also a grown-up, aren't you?"

Betty hesitated. Uncertainty was written on her face. Gucky didn't understand why Betty didn't know something so significant about herself. Was there no age limit to determine that by? He struggled to focus. Deploying telekinesis had given him beastial headache. His nose burned like fire. "What do we do, Betty? Do you have a plan?"

A sound distracted Betty. "That's Stevens. I have to go. They're watching me. I can't stay this long with you, Gucky. It's suspicious. Tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll plan the escape."

For the first time since being put in the cage, Gucky slept well. He dreamed of a city made of carrots led by a pale-haired mayor in a Mickey Mouse top, her light blue eyes looking around lovingly. When we woke up, he felt better. The presence of Monk was easier to bear.

At last, Betty came again.

“I want to know more about the facility and the circumstances,” Gucky communicated to her using words formed from the straw.

“Monk is keeping a dozen mutants and about the same number of other prisoners. He has the gift of blocking. However, he can’t act everywhere at the same time, which is why I can use my telekinesis in the barn. I’m the strongest mutant among the prisoners, but I can’t manage more than the writing at the moment. It’s like my telepathy is dead. It’s a terrible feeling.”

Gucky could only agree. He was suffering along with Betty.

She needed a short break, then she started moving the carrots she’d brought with her again. “I have a suspicion that Monk puts drugs in our water. That’s why I mostly drink water from the farm, from the cattle trough, when no one sees me. The others seem like they’re sedated. I’ve given you different water too whenever it was possible. So far, no one’s noticed. They think I’ll do whatever they say. They think I’m stupid. No one would ever believe I could escape.”

Gucky felt a touch of shame. He, too, had thought Betty was stunted in some way, but she wasn’t. Betty was distinguished by intelligence and keen observation skills. In terms of the maturing process and her own confidence, she may not have been fully grown yet, but her cognitive abilities were fully developed for a human female.

“You’re not stupid,” he wrote back to her. “How do we proceed?”

Betty looked at his collar and the metal chain before she continued writing. “I’ll get the key for the collar, then we’ll try to

escape. When it's dark, I'll sneak out of my room. There's a long outbuilding next to the barn. In its shadows, we can get close to the fence. I've started to telekinetically dig a hole there and cover it up. The earth is still in it, but it's really loose. We'll take it out and squeeze through. Then we'll try to get as far away as possible."

"Thank you for helping me."

She flushed. "I can't see you in captivity. You're different from the others somehow. Hang in there! I'll come and get you."

Gucky watched longingly as she walked along the tiles down the brightly lit hallway. He feverishly awaited his moment of freedom.

Washington, D.C.

September 21, 2036

Mildred Orsons

Mildred couldn't take it anymore. Three days had passed. Something had to have happened to Gucky; there was no other explanation. All this time, they'd convinced themselves the Ilt had the situation under control, but they'd suspected they were lying to themselves. Julian had started to make inquiries. He knew where Maro lived now. Unfortunately, they hadn't seen Maro in person. Mildred had the suspicion that Maro knew very well they were looking for him and was hiding from them.

They'd checked into a hotel near the Supreme Court and were getting more nervous by the day. Mildred was pacing restlessly back and forth in the plainly furnished room. Her gaze kept flicking to the hook where her woolen jacket hung, her pod inside it.

"This has gone far enough, Julian. We're kidding ourselves. Gucky's in deep trouble. We need to ask Adams and Mercant for help. Maybe they'll have an idea. Either way, we desperately need support. Otherwise, we don't have a hope of finding Gucky."

Julian wavered. His face took on a grim expression; he seemed

determined to do whatever he could. “Yes, but not before we’ve tried everything. Let’s take on Maro. One way or another, he’ll spit out the name of that black market dealer. Even if I have to hold a knife under his nose.”

“And how do you plan to find Maro?”

Julian huffed derisively. “I’m sure he’s there in his apartment every night. He just doesn’t open the door. We won’t get anywhere by being friendly.” He raised his head. “We broke into Lakeside, Mildred. Are we really going to let this criminal’s apartment stop us?”

Mildred hesitated a moment, but she’d committed, whatever the repercussions. “No. We’re getting Maro.” Even if it put their lives in danger. They owed it to Gucky.

9.

Nerlan's Marionettes

Rofus

One day before the battle for Remanor

Sue woke up feeling weak. The blue light in the sparsely furnished room gave only minimal illumination. It took her a moment to get her bearings. Tschubai lay next to her on the wide bed. He smelled fresher than before; one of the others must have washed him. Beside him were an oval receptacle filled with water and a towel on the floor.

Carefully, she sat up, wary of nudging Tschubai and potentially causing him pain.

Bull saw that she was awake and came over from his bed. "Sue, how are you doing?"

"Well enough to see to him. Will you take off the bandage?"

Bull nodded and got to work. Sue examined the wound on his left thigh, just above the knee. The edges looked clean, and a thin layer of new skin lay over the entry hole.

Bull rested a hand on her shoulder. "No one's expecting you to run yourself ragged."

His face looked worried to Sue. Was he thinking about their imprisonment by the Fantan? They'd performed *The Pirates of Penzance* for their captors. During the performance, Sue had been supposed to feign a collapse in order to hopefully cause enough confusion for them to flee. But she'd *actually* collapsed—and come a hair's breadth from dying.

"Don't worry, Reg."

With great caution, she put her hands on the wound and began

her work. Her entire body prickled as if she had an anthill inside her. For a few minutes, she endured the feeling and gave Tschubai the benefit of her healing ability. She felt how quickly her gift was drying up. Like a faucet closing up more and more, Sue had ever less energy to use for the regrouping and healing of cells.

"He'll be back on his feet tomorrow," she whispered, concentrating hard on only speaking English. The implanted translator was a little uncanny, but it was immensely practical too. It would only translate into the Ferron language and activate her vocal cords for that if she intended it to do so.

Gradually, the others became aware of her and Bull.

Rhodan walked over to the bed first. "Can we briefly wake up Ras to talk with him? Now that it's evening, we should clarify how we're proceeding tomorrow." He also spoke only English. Directed at Chaktor and Lossoshér, he added, "Don't speak Ferron anymore."

Both made a gesture of assent. The implant translated any English they heard and let them express themselves in English besides.

Sue bent down over Tschubai and touched his shoulder. "Ras, can you hear me?"

Tschubai turned his head and blinked. "Sue. Then it wasn't a dream after all." He tried to sit up, but Rhodan and Bull gently pushed him back down onto the soft bedding.

"Lie still," Bull ordered. "You're in a pretty bad way, and we need you at full strength in a few hours. From the look of things, we've ended up in the past."

Sue listened, stunned, as he explained about the mosaic tower. "The Dark Age," she whispered reverently. "Can that really happen? Can a device send us straight through time?"

"It's the only explanation," Bull said categorically. "Tough for me to imagine too, but there are scientists in Terrania who don't *just* claim that our universe is like a tangled ball of yarn where you can

take shortcuts by jumping from string to string. No, they also think they'll be able to calculate this flexible ball of yarn one day."

"The universe is a ball of yarn?" Sue echoed.

Lossoshér took on an air of importance. "And, according to high-ranking scientists among my people, embedded in multiple dimensions."

Sue's head was spinning.

Rhodan put a hand on her shoulder. "These are only theories and man-made imagery. Just accept it, Sue. We've gone through time, and we can go back as well. That's what counts right now."

Sue nodded reluctantly. She noticed that Thora didn't appear the slightest bit shocked by this revelation. "And how *do* we get back?"

Rhodan and Bull hurriedly explained the plan for them to all disappear amid the turmoil of battle and reach the transmitter in the future desert fort.

This plan struck fear into Sue. What would it be like, standing amid a battle? Would she keep her nerve? It had to be much worse than when shots had started flying at the shelter. People would be killed around her. She'd be able to do nothing to help despite her gift. Why did rational beings do something like that to each other? She thought back to the shelter. Damon and Tyler, the twins. The boys had obtained assault rifles and unleashed their hate on the world, their disappointment, in a firefight with the police.

She hadn't understood it then and still couldn't grasp it now. The world would be friendlier if everyone just had a little respect. Enough respect not to draw a weapon and pull the trigger to wipe out a life, at least. A chill spread through her chest.

Involuntarily, she looked at Thora, who towered up behind Rhodan. The Arkonide's face looked like a mask, her red eyes desperate. Thora's gaze kept returning to Lossoshér, as if she wanted to turn the elderly transmitter guardian to dust with the power of her thoughts. Luckily, she didn't have that ability.

What was going on inside the Arkonide? Since their arrival in the Nakuur, Thora had been asking around about Crest. From the look on her face, she'd still found no trace of her mentor. There was no one else there with white hair. No one had met Crest or his companions.

Sue felt for Thora. They had used the transmitter to find Crest, not to land in the hellscape of a century-long war.

"There's a rumor going around the Nakuur that all of Nerlan's servants and soldiers are supposed to fight," Bull said in an upbeat tone, snapping Sue out of her somber thoughts. "Apparently, the survivors will go up in Nerlan's estimation. A kind of natural selection from that nutjob's point of view."

Rhodan nodded to Tschubai. "Will you be able to teleport us a little way away from the troops in three groups?"

Tschubai hesitated. "It can't be a long distance. But I think it's possible, thanks to Sue. I'm getting stronger by the second."

He smiled at her, and Sue beamed back. It made her happy that she'd been able to help him.

"We should rest up," Rhodan recommended. "We'll need our full focus tomorrow."

"Yes," Thora said monosyllabically. She turned to Lossoshér. "But first, I want to know if you suspected this somehow. Did you know that this transmitter might take us through time? Did you use us so you could personally meet the first Thort?" Her voice sounded sharp, the words like gunshots.

Lossoshér drew his head in. "No, Thora. Truly, I didn't. I swear to you, I had no idea. According to my sources, that transmitter should have been connected to the one in the underwater dome by the Azores on Earth and one other destination. Since the Azores transmitter was destroyed, I was fairly certain this method would lead us to the transmitter that went with the one in the dome."

"But you hesitated in the transmitter," Thora accused Lossoshér

in the Arkonide language. “Something was different.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Something about the settings looked peculiar to me. I couldn’t determine what it was. Now we know. The transmitter went through time. I would love to have helped you and Crest, Thora. But I don’t regret where I am.” Lossoshér raised his head and looked over at Guall, who was meditating on the pale yellow floor next to the arch-shaped doorway.

The soldier, whom the transmitter guardian took to be the first Thort, looked as though nothing in the world around him mattered to him anymore. At the same time, he gave Sue the impression of completely resting within himself, like a holy mountain.

A transfigured expression appeared on Lossoshér’s face. “It is destiny. We’re the Lightbringers. This purpose is more important than that of any one individual.”

Thora turned around without another word and walked off. Sue saw how reddened and wet her eyes were and hurried after the Arkonide. For every one of her long steps, Sue needed one and a half.

“Thora!” She grasped her hand. “Please, don’t run away. It’s still not too late for Crest.”

Thora stopped and turned to face her. “And what makes you so sure, Sue?”

“If it all goes well, we’ll have lost three days in total,” Sue said softly. “That’s not much.”

Rhodan stepped over to them. “Sue’s right. We’re not giving up, whatever Lossoshér says or believes. The search for Crest is top priority, as it always has been.”

Sue was about to expand on this further when she noticed a shadow at the open entrance. The door couldn’t be locked from the inside; if the guards wanted to, they could come in anytime. However, the shadow in the doorway didn’t belong to a guard.

“Look,” she said quietly. “Rukaar. She’s spying on us.”

Rhodan turned his head. “I’ll take care of it. Try to sleep. We have a big day ahead of us.”

Sue nodded gratefully.

Perry Rhodan

Rhodan headed for the entryway. As he’d hoped, Rukaar stayed standing there. “You’re eavesdropping, right, Rukaar?” He tried to sound friendly and not too accusatory. Worry gnawed at him. How much had the Ferron understood?

“I was trying to,” Rukaar admitted forthrightly. “The dialect you speak among yourselves is foreign to me. Where exactly do you come from?”

Rhodan didn’t want to touch on that awkward question. “How are you doing?” he asked.

Rukaar blinked. Her nose was swollen, the fracture straightened. A bump was visible on her cheekbone. “Why do you care about that?”

“Why shouldn’t I care?”

She fell silent and looked at Guall. “I didn’t understand one or two things. Before. Lossoshér and Guall... Does the old aesthete really believe our Guall is the chosen one? The savior from the legends?”

Rhodan was no expert on the legends surrounding the first Thort. “I don’t know, Rukaar. But I know that Guall is a hope. A shining light in a dark era. What do you think?”

“He’s something special. I sense that.” Rukaar fell silent again and observed Guall attentively as he sat cross-legged on the carpet and didn’t move. “I always knew he was different, and I like him. He’s one of my closest friends. It hurts that Nerlan has put him in the Nakuur. But he’ll be allowed out tomorrow. All of you will, for the battle. The rumors are true. Nerlan will let everyone fight. The

main task of the ground troops is to uncover all the enemy positions and transmit them so that our artillery can eradicate them."

Rhodan had wondered why the inner city still hadn't been captured. And he was still wondering. "Why do soldiers have to be used as cannon fodder for that? What about air reconnaissance? Doesn't Nerlan have any drones?"

Rukaar looked at him as if he'd said something truly idiotic. "Even a Gorchoo like you must know that we hardly have any aircraft left. There are still some drones, sure. But what use are they when you can neither see nor measure the enemy? Only when the city folk pull the trigger will we know where they're hiding out."

Slowly, Rhodan understood. The Ferron technology looked to him to be comparable to Earth's, or in some respects—such as interplanetary space travel—even clearly superior, but the ninety years of war had made weapons scarce. On top of that, camouflage and jamming tech seemed to be far better developed than detection capabilities. If Nerlan didn't want to flatten the entire inner city, including the citadel, he needed clear targets.

"Is there any chance of getting our equipment back? We'd be able to handle it, and it would let us penetrate into enemy territory much more safely."

"Enemy? Nice try, Rhodan, but I see through you. You see the city Ferrons as people like you, even if they have a different skin color. Besides, Nerlan will never let you have the suits. They're his property and dangerous in your hands. You can try to escape." She looked hesitant, as if she could hardly bring herself to say the next words. "Actually, I came to warn you. Nerlan's going to put his own soldiers in danger. He has horrible plans for the attack. Watch out for the signal. When you hear high-pitched beeping over the coms, it means blinding flash bombs are about to fall. I'm not actually permitted to give a signal, because the enemy can hear and understand it too, but I don't want to let my soldiers bleed out on Nerlan's altar."

"Why are you warning me? Why not your soldiers?"

“My soldiers have been warned.” She wavered. Rhodan could see her uncertainty. She couldn’t be accustomed to justifying herself to a soldier of the lowest rank. Rukaar lowered her gaze. “Maybe I just like you. Didn’t you say you grew up in an area where people help one another?”

“Thank you for your warning, Rukaar. What’s your assessment of tomorrow’s battle? How strong is the opposition?”

“Very strong. The enemy’s weapons have an enormous firing rate, and the city folk still have plenty of ammo. They know what awaits them. When we’ve taken the inner city, Nerlan will have every one of them killed.”

The thought that Nerlan would have the city’s entire population executed after one victory gave Rhodan stomach pain. “Why? I thought resources were scarce. Wouldn’t it make more sense to fill up his own rosters?” It was a struggle to talk so emotionlessly and purposefully about Remanor’s inhabitants, but he knew that Rukaar and Nerlan would understand this language better, and respond more to it, than an appeal to their compassion.

“Nerlan already gave an ultimatum three days ago. He won’t take it back. Every city-dweller, whether soldier or civilian, armed or otherwise, will die.”

This is insane. Nerlan and his followers are so blind. They’re slaughtering their own people. The consequences of this action were immeasurable. Dead Ferrons would cover the streets. Rhodan saw the scenes clearly in his imagination. “Can’t you do something, Rukaar? You’re Nerlan’s sister. His blood. Convince him.”

Rukaar raised her arms and slid her hands apart. By now, Rhodan knew that his gesture stood for refusal and bitterness among Ferrons. “Nerlan and I, we’re not family. Who do you think put me in this state? I’m in Nerlan’s service just like everyone else.”

“Then break away from him!”

Rukaar looked at the floor. “Take care of yourself, Rhodan. See you after the battle.” Abruptly, she turned around and walked out

of the room.

“Get up, Gorchoo!” A thundering voice woke Rhodan. “Battle calls. This is your chance to prove which side you’re on.” A blue face with a wide nose was leaning over him. Hands were clapping next to his ear, forcibly dragging him out of the peace of sleep.

Rhodan sat up and tried not to let his inner turbulence show. His heart was racing; his palms felt cold and sweaty. He exchanged a rapid glance with Bull, who was sitting next to him. After the tribulations of the last few days, Bull hadn’t made even one joking comment about how they’d effectively shared a bed. Like Rhodan, he’d been satisfied with having somewhere warm to lie down, with sanitary facilities in easy reach.

The stocky soldier with the wide nose and loud voice moved on to Chaktor and Lossoshér.

Rhodan stood. Several soldiers in gray combat dress had occupied the room like hostile territory. Nerlan stood between them, an unmistakable sight. The synthetic material of his blue-and-white uniform shimmered in the artificial light. Nerlan’s swollen face looked markedly better than it had the day before. Almost half of the purulent pimples and scabby protrusions had disappeared. Sue had done a great job.

From the other side of the room, Sue and Thora were led over to them. Both looked so proud and defiant that they could have been sisters despite the many physical differences.

Chaktor and Lossohér stood up as well. Only Guall remained sitting on the floor like a statue, appearing not to notice anything around him. If Rhodan didn’t know better, he’d have thought the three-eyed man had turned to stone overnight.

“Get up!” Nerlan barked at Guall. “You can sit around after the battle.”

Guall opened first the third, chalcedony-colored eye, then both of the copper-colored ones. He looked up at Nerlan. “There will be a lot of death today. Do you really want that?”

Nerlan made a sound that Rhodan's translator presented as a kind of snort. "Death has been my companion since my very first screams. And I only do what I want, you know."

"And if it also means your death?" Guall asked softly.

Nerlan looked unnerved for a second, then rage appeared on his face. He clenched his teeth before answering. "Stand up already, you freak of nature. If I have to wait any longer, the morning will start with *your* death."

Guall got to his feet with unexpected ease. His movements looked as graceful as a dancer's. There was no sign that he'd been sitting for so many hours.

A transformation had taken place in the scrawny Ferron, and it surprised Rhodan. *He looks like a rock in the infinite surf. As if he's ascended to a position beyond all desires.*

"What gives us the honor of a personal visit?" Rhodan asked as neutrally as he could. He'd ideally have confronted Nerlan in a very different manner, but he wasn't in a position to do that. Next to him, Bull scoffed at his choice of words.

Nerlan turned to him. "What do you think, Rhodan? I'm getting my medicine and some leverage, in my own way." He snapped his fingers and indicated four of the eight total soldiers.

Two men and two women in combat dress stepped forward, their faces committed and servile. They grabbed Thora and Sue.

"What is the meaning of this?" Thora raised her elbows high, trying to fend them off. A fist landed in her face and a second in her stomach.

"Stop!" Rhodan told her. "Thora, don't make it more difficult for no reason!"

Thora actually did hold still. Whether this was due to Rhodan's words or the soldiers' tight grip, he couldn't have said.

The Arkonide raised her chin. "You'll pay for your deeds,

Nerlan."

Nerlan made a noise that Rhodan understood as a chuckle. "The white-haired one has so much fire. What would it take to quell the flames, I wonder?"

Rhodan wanted to rush ahead—to pull Nerlan's weapon out of his chest holster and shoot him with his own pistol. *Calm down!* he ordered himself. *I have to stay calm.*

"Perry..." Bull began before falling silent. Chaktor, Tschubai, and Lossoshér exchanged similarly disappointed looks with him. Nerlan was separating them. Their plan was in danger.

"You promised us!" Sue protested, struggling against the soldier holding her. "You said we'd go into the battle together!"

Nerlan walked over to her. The look in his dark eyes spoke of amusement. He bent down to Sue's level. "Promised? I promised nothing. Do you think I'm an idiot, young lady? Why should I risk letting my valuable medicine be damaged in the battle? And why should I play all my trump cards? You have the choice of healing me or dying. I believe you'd even endure torture." His face turned serious. "I know the Ferrons, and I know how you are. You can bear your own pain, but if I cut white-hair into strips in front of you, *then* you'd obey." He straightened himself and turned his back on both Sue and Rhodan.

He's blackmailing her with her own kindheartedness, Rhodan thought, furious. *That monster.*

Rhodan didn't doubt Nerlan meant what he had said. Thora was a means to make Sue compliant. What should he do? Impotent rage began to fill him. For now, he couldn't intervene. He had to wait for the right moment. At least he had Tschubai with him, and thus a secret weapon Nerlan didn't know about.

The brawny Ferron with the thunderous voice turned to him. His face looked unusually wide, even for a Ferron. The man's forehead protruded far forward, with a raised spot in the middle that looked like a boil. "I am Herloss, leader of section B. You will all come

with me."

He gave Rhodan no time to answer before turning and marching out of the room.

The soldiers went to aid Tschubai, but he shook off their hands. "I'm fine."

Sue and Thora were taken away.

Bull gritted his teeth. "Sue," he said quietly, his gaze outraged and despairing.

Rhodan cursed Nerlan's prudence. He glanced at Tschubai. Could the teleporter pick up Sue and Thora later? How close would Nerlan even get to the battle? Would he stay in his command center and watch it all unfold via camera drones?

As they parted in the hallway, Thora cast one last look at Rhodan that made his chest hurt. How proudly and beautifully the Arkonide walked between the soldiers. He had to act fast if they were to prevent what Nerlan wanted far too clearly from happening after all. But he didn't see any way. The soldiers were armed. They'd no doubt mercilessly shoot down Rhodan and his friends if they resisted.

They were ejected from the Nakuur and onto a gray forecourt bathed in the glaring bluish white glow of floodlights. At least a hundred soldiers stood guard at the sides, keeping an eye on the newcomers. Several tank-like vehicles were waiting for deployment in the corners. They were roughly ten meters long and reminded Rhodan of the Chinese tanks that had shot at the Arkonide protective dome in the Gobi. Their motors were already running, ominously heralding doom in the morning silence.

Gradually, more and more men and women in civilian clothing came out of the Nakuur. Most looked panicked, though some looked happy too. Perhaps the latter preferred to die or to escape from Nerlan's service in the chaos of battle.

Rhodan couldn't help noticing the silence that hung over the

bombed-out suburb. Whenever he'd been outside before, he could hear the attacks of long-range guided missiles like soft thunder. Now the weapons were still. The ground troops' invasion was beginning.

"What a nightmare," Lossoshér murmured, his voice fractured.

Chaktor and Guall stood quietly next to him.

Orders in Ferron drifted across the square. Herloss set the strange unit of exotic Ferrons in motion. Rhodan saw a man with three arms and a woman with green hair more shimmering than he'd ever seen before. *How a mermaid's hair would look.* The Ferron woman's expression made a lasting impact on Rhodan's mind. In its desperation, there was no mistaking what the woman feared: pain and death.

"What are we going to do?" Bull asked in English. "How do we get Thora and Sue back?"

Tschubai sheepishly lowered his gaze. "I wish I could rescue them right now. But I can feel how weak my powers are. They're only slowly coming back. I still feel wretched. It must be because of the infection."

Rhodan looked across the overfull square with a critical eye. "Getting them back now when we're surrounded by enemies wouldn't achieve much. We have to wait it out. If there's no other chance, we'll split up." He looked at Bull. "If need be, you, me, and Ras will stay behind in Remanor and free Thora and Sue. But it might not come to that."

Tschubai rested a hand on Bull's shoulder. "Rhodan's right. All is not lost yet. Nerlan doesn't know about my abilities, and I'm sure I'll be able to jump again soon. Give me another half hour."

Bull's face relaxed. Rhodan felt better too. He wouldn't give up either Thora or Sue. He only hoped that Nerlan would settle for healing for now.

"Forward!" thundered Herloss's voice. The leader caught up to

Rhodan, his gaze lingering on Tschubai. Clearly, he'd received special orders from Nerlan that concerned the heroes from the legends.

The tanks rolled out. Ferrons to the rear pushed those in front; Rhodan had no choice but to leave the square with his friends and Guall. "Stay together!" he warned them.

In the throng, they could easily be separated. But even Lossoshér and Guall were careful to stay side by side. Chaktor lent Lossoshér an arm. In an emergency, their societally-driven ambivalence towards one another dissipated.

Rhodan felt Bull's shoulder against his as they were forced through the rolling shutter as if through the eye of a needle. They matched the pace of the troupe, leaving the glaring floodlights behind and marching into the Ferron morning. A gray streak on the horizon announced Vega rising. For the first time since their arrival, there were no clouds in the sky. The blue light would illuminate everything that was to come with gruesome clarity.

Several soldiers in positions of authority indicated the way. On a rust-red concrete square, they took up position next to four army groups. Rhodan estimated around a thousand soldiers around them. Ferrons in white uniforms were distributing weapons and camo suits. Among the others' driving cries, they put on their equipment. Rhodan had an automatic rifle with a folded stock pressed into his hands; for its length of around sixty centimeters, it was unexpectedly light, he guessed two and a half kilos max. Beyond that, he received five magazines, which he put in the pockets of his far-too-short pants. A Ferron threw him a dented helmet with an integrated com transmitter on a bent stick. Hesitantly, he bent down and grabbed the head covering.

It's not my war, Rhodan thought, shuddering. *Just like last time. The war against the Topsidans wasn't mine either. And yet, I'm forced to interfere.*

Lossoshér whistled with each breath. His ribcage was rising and falling far too quickly. The weapon in his hands swayed back and forth.

“Stay calm,” Guall said with an encouraging wink of his third eye. “I’ll take care of you. Nothing will happen to you.”

Lossoshér’s eyes glimmered wetly. He looked at Guall with a gratitude that seemed immeasurable. His breathing really did calm down.

Rhodan concentrated and, like the others, reached for his weapon belt to hang the weapon on it. In front of them, more orders were being hurled into the ranks. Curse-filled tirades and hate speech about the citizens of Remanor followed. This inhumane bellowing was simply repulsive to him.

Their group was clearly the last one. Herloss stepped forward. “As you see, you are not alone! The legendary Chantin-Ohn is with us!” He indicated Tschubai, presenting him like a head of cattle. The Sudanese man wore a particularly well-made camo suit that actually fit. “Chantin-Ohn, the great Savon, who always wins! He fights for Nerlan! He fights for you!”

Storms of enthusiasm broke out. Rhodan heard numerous shouts of “No mercy!”—apparently a kind of battle cry for Nerlan’s army.

“Go forward!” Herloss hissed. “One wrong move and I’ll shoot you.”

Long vehicles approached at high speed. They reminded Rhodan of a mixture of a jeep and a truck. Their external color melded with the rust red of the street. They had no roofs. They stopped about ten meters away, one after the other. New vehicles steadily arrived after them.

Lossoshér wavered. He stumbled, his eyes widened in terror.

“Go!” Herloss roared.

Group by group, they got onto the loading platforms. Chaktor and Tschubai pulled Lossoshér up. As soon as the ramp was at capacity, the driver started. Tanks accompanied them.

The troops in their district hadn’t even finished loading when the enemy reacted to the deployment. A bright howl whistled in the air.

Adrenalin raced through Rhodan's body.

"Dammit!" Bull cursed.

His exclamation was lost amid the bang of a missile's impact. The strike boomed through Rhodan's body and made every bone vibrate. Screams rang out and ended abruptly. A blaze surged into the sky, smoke pluming. The smells of burning plastic and flesh wafted into Rhodan's face. The battle for the heart of Remanor had begun.

Sue Mirafiore

Sue's entire body was trembling. Nerlan had betrayed her. Both angry and afraid, she followed the warlord into the command post. Soldiers put handcuffs and fetters on her and Thora as soon as they'd stepped off the platform in the shaft.

Nerlan pursed his lips. Sue couldn't be sure, but the expression on the scabbed face looked like the equivalent of a smirk. At the same time, it made an animalistic impression. *Like a satisfied, fat crocodile that's put on a blue toad's skin.* She shook her head to drive the thought away. *What would Reg and Perry do in this situation? And John Marshall? What would John do? They'd keep their cool, I bet, no matter how tough it got for them.*

"You weren't expecting this—isn't that right, young lady?"

Sue would never forget the venomous way Nerlan asked "isn't that right?" In those three words, the disgusting, smug despot showed the full extent of his sadism. "No," she said stiffly. "I wasn't. Does that make you happy?"

Nerlan leaned against the tabletop. "A little," he admitted.

Seeking help, Sue glanced at Thora. The Arkonide pressed her lips tightly together, her eyes incandescent. Sue couldn't help thinking of the Furies from Greek mythology.

"Why didn't you just take what you wanted yesterday?" Sue

asked bitterly. “Why this charade?”

“I wanted to see what you accomplished with the dark-skinned one, young lady. I needed him. He will motivate my men. My healers failed. The infection was too advanced. Without you, he’d have died. That’s why I have no doubt that you can heal me in the blink of an eye. You’re something truly special. A treasure worth guarding.”

In an unexpectedly violent gesture, Nerlan burst away from the table, stepped across the carpet, and grabbed Thora by her white hair. He pulled her head back as if he wanted to bite into her throat like a vampire.

Thora didn’t stir. Only her gaze showed clearly what she’d have liked to do to him.

Sue trembled harder. “Don’t hurt her!”

Nerlan pulled Thora’s head back a little farther still. “We’ll see about that. First I want to know if you can heal me. And I don’t mean eventually, in the future. I mean right now.”

Sue wavered. She had to play for time. Tschubai was the secret weapon they were counting on. She’d saved him, and he wouldn’t leave her and Thora in the lurch.

“I’m waiting,” Nerlan demanded. “And I don’t like waiting.” He looked over at the four soldiers standing guard at the room entrance. “How would you like this?” he hissed in Thora’s ear. “I take you right here on this table, white-hair, in front of my soldiers.”

Sue wished she could sink into the floor. The situation was starting to be too much for her. She was afraid Thora would fight back despite her bonds, but Thora reacted with eerie calm.

“I thought you gave your victims a choice,” the Arkonide retorted coldly.

Nerlan’s free hand ran over Thora’s throat, the fingers gliding along a vein. “In your case, I’m prepared to make an exception,

white-hair."

Sue bit her lip. What should she do? Implore Nerlan to leave Thora alone? Not a promising plan. What leverage did she have left? She'd played a part to deceive Nerlan and he'd seen through it. Sue wasn't detached enough to stand and watch while Thora was tortured or raped. The way the fat man groped at Thora broke her resistance. She found it harder and harder to think logically. Soon there'd be nothing left of her but fear.

"I..." Sue began, ready to promise Nerlan whatever he wanted.

"Monterny," Thora interrupted, quietly but emphatically. Just this one word. It hung in the air like a weapon that Sue only had to grasp. Monterny, the suggestor Sue had killed, showing the dark side of her gift.

I can't only give life, but take it too. She hesitated. Her gaze met Thora's, and it was as if the red eyes were giving her courage. Her trembling stopped. "I'll do it, Durhai," she said to Nerlan, firmer now. "Let's go to your chamber."

"You'll do it in this room," Nerlan replied. He let Thora go. "In front of my guards. Come here."

With uncertain steps, Sue walked over to him. Her skin felt cold; she hardly felt able to breathe. *It's wrong to kill a person. Even someone like Nerlan. I mustn't misuse my gift for that.* Tormented, Sue closed her eyes. Was she supposed to let Thora be raped? She grew dizzy. Her thoughts hurtled back through time, to Monterny, the man who had threatened Sid. Then, she'd acted in self-defense, not with cold deliberation. Without her direct intervention, Sid would have died. Now she had to make a decision. *It's murder. Despite everything. Do you want to be just like him?*

Only two more steps separated her from Nerlan, who was completely absorbed in the sight of Thora. Lustfulness covered his face.

He'll have Thora for certain even if I do heal him. And if I kill him—what happens to us then? Sue looked at the guards. Would they

immediately shoot her and Thora? Or would the soldiers perhaps not grasp what was happening to Nerlan? If she made it look like a heart attack so they thought they only had to take Nerlan to the healing station...

Disgust at herself and her gift shook her. *Oh, Sid, John, I'm planning a murder. Help me...*

One step left and she could touch Nerlan and suck the life from his heart. She extended an arm, reaching for the fat body...and sank to her knees. Her stomach revolted; she choked up bitter liquid. Tears welled in her eyes. *I can't do it. I'm not a soldier who cold-bloodedly sends others to their deaths. Thora might be able to do that, but not me.* Even if the guards hadn't been there, Sue doubted she'd have been able to do it. Sue looked up at Thora, expecting to see contempt in the Arkonide's gaze, but Thora's facial expression was compassionate.

Nerlan took a step back and looked down at her with mild interest. "What now, young lady? Shall I take white-hair while you continue to sully my floor?"

"You win," Sue croaked weakly. "I'll heal you."

10.

At the Very Front

Rofus

The Battle for Remanor

The vehicles fanned out around fifty meters from a seven-meter-tall and three-meter-wide stone wall. Constant fire came from the inner city. The defenders had holed up in the upper floors of high-rises. Grenades ripped holes in the ground and more vehicles went up in flames. The impacts pierced marrow and bone.

Rhodan gritted his teeth. He was standing on the loading surface with nothing to hold for balance except Bull, who was himself holding on tightly to the side of the vehicle. The scent of their sweat stood out among the Ferrons.

At their flanks, the tanks returned fire. Mobile guns that shot upward like howitzers rolled up and came into play. Their vehicle braked, the hard jerk pushing Rhodan into Bull.

“Out!” Herloss roared.

They jumped off the platform and helped Lossoshér. No sooner had they left the vehicle than it went up in a ball of flame. The shockwave threw Rhodan onto the street. Struggling, he got back to his feet, then took the moaning Lossoshér by the underarm to carry some of his weight. His heart was pounding. The mixture of adrenaline and norepinephrine made him hardly feel Lossoshér’s weight. Every cell in his body was ready to flee.

But flight was out of the question for now. The marching orders were given; behind them, soldiers pushed forward. Their unit formed the vanguard of the attack. Tschubai’s tall form towered conspicuously above the small Ferrons.

“Go right!” Guall called to them.

Another order came via com. “Forward!” Herloss ordered through the integrated helmet speakers at their ears.

Rhodan listened to Guall, veering right and heading for a bombed-out brown high-rise with only three stories left. Next to him, projectiles struck. The sound of the shots thundered in his eardrums and chest. Behind him, a wounded person screamed.

Simultaneously, their own tanks fired at the wall in front of them. At the last moment, Rhodan dodged to the side as a piece of rubble plummeted towards him. Next to him, Chaktor gasped. A stone bounced off his helmet, sending him lurching.

This is insane.

With a few shots, the tanks tore holes in a wall that had to be at least three meters thick. The soldiers behind relentlessly pushed Rhodan and his companions through the resulting corridor. They went through smoke and dust. Rhodan coughed; his eyes watered. For a moment, he felt like he’d lost his bearings in the chaos, then he saw the elevated fortress between two plumes of smoke. The painful feeling in his chest didn’t just come from his inflamed lungs. People were dying around him.

“Perry!” Bull fought his way closer to him. “We have to close ranks even more!” Shoulder to shoulder, they stumbled towards the fort amid the cacophony of shots and detonations. For the first time, Rhodan glimpsed the building complex in the heart of the city in its full scale. The citadel’s towers soared like a four-fingered hand against the turquoise sky. A wide metal defensive ring surrounded the facility.

Boring military building my ass, he thought, recalling the desert fort. All that had stood then were meager remnants and rubble. A lot of it must have originated in a later time. In front of him, however, rose a building of unique splendor. Like the tower that would still be preserved in the year 2036, each individual building had mosaic-covered outer walls. In the blue light of Vega, they didn’t just glow—with the sunrise, they sent bright rays through all the city streets that pointed in all directions like fingers of light and drew mysterious symbols in the turquoise-green dawn. Seldom had

Rhodan seen a building of such beauty. Encountering it within such an inferno felt grotesque.

"Over to the left!" Guall bellowed over the com link. "Take cover! Enemy position at two o'clock!"

The present cruelly caught up with Rhodan. He pulled Lossohér with him and followed Guall's instructions. After the first experience, other soldiers, too, put more stock in Guall's words than those of their own superiors.

Herloss's voice in their ears cracked with rage. "Mar-Ton! You follow *my* orders! What is the—"

A grenade exploded at the exact place Guall had called them away from.

From a two-story building to their right, shots clattered. Rhodan saw hostile Ferrons in the window opening.

"Onward, Dradesires, onward!" sounded the warmongers' cries from behind them. "Follow Chantin-Ohn into battle!"

There was nothing else Rhodan could do. He had to keep gaining ground. Grenades flew through the air, towards the enemy's position. Nerlan's soldiers shot down a Ferron in a building entryway. Gunfire ratted forth from one of the lower windows. Violent firefights raged.

Calm began to fill Rhodan. His heart wanted to leap out of his chest, and he was breathing heavily. At the same time, he managed to focus. Despite the deadly threat and the chaos around him, he held his nerve. "Guall, do you have an idea of the safest way to get to the fort?"

"No," Guall replied, fully audible over the noise." Not yet. But we'll stay left."

Rhodan obeyed. They swung to the left, directing themselves towards a large blue-green building that looked like a modern subway station. Above them, the air flashed. A volley of projectiles hit the enemy-occupied high-rise. Fire engulfed the building's upper

reaches, and the uppermost floor collapsed with a loud crack. Soldiers in red uniforms streamed out of the entrances, trying to escape the death trap.

Rhodan lifted his weapon and pressed the stock against his shoulder. He couldn't bring himself to fire. This wasn't his war. But he'd have to shoot if he wanted to defend his life.

"Down!" Guall bellowed through the com. "Eyes closed!"

Rhodan understood straight away and grabbed Lossohér, who was walking next to him, by the hip. He pulled the old man to the ground. "Flash bombs!" he yelled.

They were barely on the ground when a glaring white light rose up that Rhodan could perceive even with his eyes closed. Bitterness rose up in him. *Rukaar said she'd give a warning signal. Where's the signal?* He heard screams. Many of Nerlan's soldiers had looked directly into the light just as the city dwellers had. Would they be blinded permanently or only temporarily?

"That monster," Bull hissed next to him. "Butchering his own people."

"Keep moving!" Guall ordered, having become the leader alongside Rhodan.

Rhodan silently thanked him for it, since he didn't know his way around Remanor at all. Nor was he a battle-hardened soldier—he was an astronaut. His hands were trembling. He forced himself to be strong for his friends.

Rhodan tried to tune out the men and women from both sides writhing on the street, screaming their pain and hatred. It took him a lot of energy just to keep running, to not stop to help. Rhodan's group were among the few in the vanguard who had withstood Nerlan's insidious attack unscalthed. Even Herloss seemed to have taken his share; he stayed back, stumbling.

While walking, Rhodan turned to Guall. "Guall, what exactly does your eye see? Other places? The future?"

“Many things, Perry Rhodan,” he answered vaguely. He guided them to a copse of reddish trees with curtains of triangular leaves. “For example, I see that it will be tough to break away for now despite our head start. A lot of people will follow Ras Tschubai, the black warrior. And me too. The soldiers sense that I’ve changed. The gaze of my third eye touches them, reaches their souls, which yearn for hope.”

As if to lend credence to his words, cries rose up from behind. At least fifty soldiers were storming after them.

“Can you locate Thora and Sue?” Rhodan asked, accelerating his steps.

“They’re in Nerlan’s command post.”

“Dammit!” Bull exclaimed. “Perry, are you thinking the same thing I am?”

Rhodan gave him a curt nod. “Guall, take us a little way away from the others if you can, and form a mental cluster with Ras! That way, you can boost his power, and he can retrieve Thora and Sue!” He flinched as a yellow high-rise to his right, where he’d been thinking of advancing next, crumbled under fire from several missiles. The rubble buried soldiers on both sides.

“What’s a mental cluster?” Guall asked. He was helping to support Lossoshér too. The transmitter guardian was a pallid shade of blue; he was close to collapsing. They’d have to carry him if he didn’t recover.

Tschubai answered in Rhodan’s stead. “You concentrate and link your strength with mine. That’ll make my ability stronger. It sounds complicated, but it’s simple really. Where I come from, there are a lot of gifted people. We’ve tested it extensively.”

An explosion at close range interrupted their conversation. Rhodan’s ears rang.

“Along there!” Guall shouted, giving a new direction.

The smoke was so thick that they had to join hands to avoid

losing one another.

More shots rang out. They ran behind the wall of a public building to escape the barrage. Together, they rushed into a street lined with ruined high-rises. Guall led them into a burned-out ground floor. Finally, they had a moment to catch their breath. Rhodan leaned against the wall, exhausted.

Lossohér sank to the floor and gasped for breath, panicked. Chaktor saw to him.

"What now?" Rhodan urged. "What do you say, Guall? Will you form a mental cluster with Ras so we can get Thora and Sue and leave this hellscape behind?"

The three-eyed man wavered, touched his forehead, and finally looked at Rhodan with all three eyes. "No."

"Why not? Sue made you see. Without her, your third eye would still be closed. You owe it to her."

Bull was scowling as grimly as if he were planning a murder.

Guall straightened up to his full height, reaching up to Rhodan's shoulder. "That's true, Rhodan. Sue enabled me to see. But you all know that Ras is weakened. The jumps could consume him."

"So?" Bull snapped at Guall, exchanging a glance with Tschubai. "Don't you think Ras knows that?"

Rhodan stepped even closer to Bull. "We can't leave Sue and Thora behind! Let's get them back. This is our chance."

"No. We're going straight to the transmitter," Guall asserted firmly. The three-eyed man lifted up a metal chain that hung around his neck, revealing Lossoshér's data cube.

Tense, Rhodan looked through the window out of the corner of his eye. The battle was still raging outside. Shots were landing and lightning flashed across the turquoise sky.

"Lossohér gave me this last night," Guall explained in a serious

tone. “The Thort belongs to the transmitters. He can’t put the small, the obvious over the greater whole.”

“He has to consider both,” Rhodan objected. In his thoughts, he saw Thora and Nerlan. “Please, Guall, you—”

An explosion cut him off. He squinted. On the other side of the street, a square hole was opening in the red concrete.

“A counterattack!” Guall cried. “They want to grind down Nerlan’s troops from the back!” He looked at Rhodan reproachfully. “You distracted me!”

“Let’s get out of here!” Bull shouted.

The majority of the troops had moved on by now.

Rhodan grabbed Lossoshér. With Tschubai’s help, he carried him out of the building, away from the attackers. They hadn’t been caught yet. However, when he looked around, he realized that that hole wasn’t the only one anymore. All around, the ground was opening, square manhole covers being heaved aside. Out of them streamed assailants in red uniforms, cutting off the way back to the suburbs. Now there was only one way—forward.

Durhai Nerlan

Nerlan felt a mighty itching on his thigh. It didn’t bother him. For the first time in years, he was happy. *I’ll take Remanor, get healed, and can finally join the war properly as a leading force. There will be a third, a new power, emanating from me and my people. All will cower before Nerlan the Great, Nerlan the Healed, who will be beautiful and terrible.*

He took a good look at the trembling child as she stood up from the ground. How delicate those features looked, eyelashes and brows a fine gossamer. And how much it pleased him that her skin wasn’t blue like that of most Ferrons. The tissue had an entirely unique tone, pale as Michas milk. It would surely feel soft to the

touch. He wanted the small woman, just as he did white-hair. Both would be his playthings and serve for his amusement. The sight of them would be a daily reminder of these hours when he celebrated his greatest triumph.

"Do it now," he demanded, looking the young woman deep in the eyes. "Go on."

She gulped visibly. She had courage, no doubt about that, but she was naive. Was there anything more intoxicating than the naivety of a child? How easy this Sue had been to influence. How safe she had felt. Nerlan had torn the ground out from under her feet and made her walk on thin glass. He enjoyed observing the first tentative steps she took, crunching and crackling across the surface.

You should fall deep, young lady. Very deep. When I'm finished with you, you'll be my submissive instrument, ready to serve at my beck and call.

"Undress, Durhai," demanded his future instrument, with whom he would buy fame and power.

Nerlan took a step back from her and waved the guards over. They knew his signals and reacted instantly. At a wave of his hand, Soor undid the prisoner's handcuffs and fetters.

"This time *you* will undress, young lady. You will treat me naked, and afterwards I will see how satisfied I am with the results."

That she had just spewed up a torrent of liquid did not disturb him in the least. He was used to worse smells.

The instrument timidly grasped the lower edge of her gray top. The garment sat unusually loose and matched no fashion that Nerlan recognized. But what did he know about the clothing worn on other planets of the system? He liked the top because it was special. He also liked that the small woman was taking it off for him. She slowly rolled up the material—then hesitated.

Anger rose up in Nerlan. "Don't stall, you worthless piece of shit,

or I'll..." He stopped when he saw what had distracted the woman. Behind him, Rukaar stepped off the platform, passed the guards and came over to him.

"Durhai Nerlan, we need to talk."

Nerlan's face burned. "Talk? Did I not make myself clear that I didn't want to see you again before the battle?"

"The battle has started."

"And you should be fighting, Sir-Lan Rukaar." *Do me the favor of snuffing it during the battle.*

"Have you heard of the three-eyed one? The savior?"

It didn't escape Nerlan's notice that white-hair and the small woman exchanged glances. White-hair positioned herself in front of the trembling girl, hiding her from Nerlan's gaze. Women. No doubt white-hair was following some kind of instinct that drove her to protect the weaker one.

"This is nonsense. Why are you insulting me with it?"

"You are not only Durhai Nerlan." Rukaar looked unusually resolute. Strange, since he thought he'd finally broken her resistance along with her nose and her jaw. Rukaar breathed in deeply and continued speaking. "You're also my half brother. Think back to the way it was before! We wanted to help our people. All we've achieved is war and ruin. We've turned into exactly what we were fighting against. This war swallows up those who are in its way and transforms them into willing enforcers. Remember yourself, Nerlan! I believe the rumors are true. We must go to Guall and protect him so that nothing befalls him in the battle. If we entrust ourselves to his guidance, make him our advisor—"

"Nonsense!" Nerlan interrupted. "He's no more a savior than he is a black hero-warrior. I'm sick of the fairy tales, Rukaar. And I certainly won't make some random soldier into my advisor just because a radioactive mutation has given him a third eye."

"But Nerlan, it's a real—"

“You are boring me.” *And you’re stirring up the prisoners.* He didn’t like the gleam that had appeared in white-hair’s eyes thanks to Rukaar’s words.

“Please, Nerlan. At least think about it.”

“There’s nothing to think about. Now, get out, Rukaar, before I have you tortured.”

Rukaar raised her head proudly. Her fingers were balled into fists as if she wanted to punch him. Naturally, she didn’t carry any weapons inside this room. No one was allowed to do so other than his guards. This safety precaution had seemed excessive to him just two years ago, but by now he had many enemies. Maybe Rukaar was one of them. Something new was growing in his half sister; he felt that unmistakably. She looked as though the incident two days earlier had actually strengthened her.

“Is that your final word, Durhai Nerlan?”

Nerlan snapped his fingers to summon his guards. “No. I’ve reconsidered. Take Sir-Lan Rukaar away. Keep in the Nakuur until I decide what to do with her.” He looked at Rukaar. “You’re walking dangerous paths.”

Soor stepped forward first, weapon brandished. Satisfied, Nerlan watched as he stepped toward Rukaar under the dismayed gazes of the two prisoners and reached for her hands.

“Just one more thing,” Rukaar said quietly.

Nerlan listened. Rukaar’s voice sounded different than usual. There was a decisiveness there that he’d never observed in his half sister before. “What?” he asked dismissively.

“You’re already dead. You just haven’t realized yet.” In a fluid motion, Rukaar reached for Soor’s weapon, took it, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

Nerlan instinctively jumped to the side. The bullet grazed his head. Icy cold spread through him. He stared at Rukaar. At this distance, there was no escape. He heard the small woman scream,

saw Rukaar's grim face and, beside it, Soor's. The other guards didn't react; none came to his aid. *Betrayal.*

Nerlan's fingers sought the pistol in his holster, but before he could reach it, Soor had grabbed his hands.

"Rukaar and I," he said firmly, "are *Dimar*. I will be a good husband to her."

Nerlan opened his mouth to say something. He wanted to roar all his contempt at Rukaar and Soor.

Rukaar pulled the trigger again. The bullet drove into his chest. His fingers jerked up to the entry wound next to his heart. The world turned red. Blood clung to Nerlan's hand. A gray shroud fell over his vision. The last thing he saw were white-hair's sparkling, ruby-red eyes. *Who or what gave Rukaar the courage for that shot?* Nerlan wondered before his thoughts dissolved into pain and darkness.

Perry Rhodan

"Dammit, it just never ends!" While running, Bull fired at a Ferron who had discovered them.

Rhodan saw no other way to save his own skin either. Hundreds of soldiers were streaming out of the holes in the ground. There had to be an underground network in the sewer system connecting the tunnels with the citadel.

"It's their last, desperate stand," Rhodan realized as one Ferron after another jumped out into the street and looked for cover. "If they fail, Nerlan's army has won."

New detonations blazed up; the staccato of gunfire rattled across the square; flashes of light flickered.

"No...more... No, no, no..." Lossoshér yammered on his hands and knees. By now, his breathing was so erratic that Rhodan was afraid for him. Unlike humans, Ferrons didn't sweat. They were

used to breathing quickly, but not *that* quickly. What would mean hyperventilating for a human could, in extreme cases, kill an elderly or weakened Ferron with lung spasms in just a few minutes.

"Try to stay calm!" he called in Lossohér's direction. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chaktor and Guall attending to the panting man.

While sitting, Guall raised his head, his third eye looking bloodshot. "We have to get over there!" He pointed to an access tunnel to a subterranean transport system.

Rhodan could see what looked like a kind of subway station inside. He didn't waste any time with follow-up questions. He just looked for the shortest route and pressed ahead. Tschubai stayed hot on his heels, with Bull securing the rear. The latter's barrage of swearing since the counterattack began could have filled a book by now.

Chaktor carried Lossoshér while Guall shot for both of them, defending their portion of the road with the assuredness of a battle-hardened soldier. Ultimately, they could credit the three-eyed man for them reaching the tunnel unharmed. His precise shots earned him respect even among the enemy.

A Ferron woman with an assault rifle ran into Rhodan's path and raised her weapon. Rhodan was quicker and pulled the trigger of his own. The recoil hit him hard in the shoulder. The soldier plunged to the ground with a yelp, her hands clenched around her leg. Had he hit an artery?

Don't think about it, Rhodan thought, his body bathed in cold sweat. Anger at Nerlan and this entire senseless war set his breath racing. He hadn't gone through the transmitter to murder Ferrons. *Onward,* he urged himself. The tunnel leading underground—nothing else mattered. His entire being was composed of this singular goal.

"Flash bombs!" Guall thundered over the com link. At the same moment, a pervasive beeping tone rang out, blaring uncomfortably in their ears.

Rhodan threw himself to the ground, his hands over his head. Blinding light appeared. *What I wouldn't give for an Arkonide suit with a dimmable visor.* With deep breaths, he used the forced pause to recover his strength. The image of that soldier writhing on the floor wouldn't leave his head.

"Onward!" Guall shouted.

While the enemy hesitated, expecting more flash bombs, they worked their way towards the tunnel entrance. It seemed to be the only point in the area with no fighting. The building walls glittered in lime green speckled with gold. Reliefs of children playing awoke a surreal impression in Rhodan that he was dreaming.

They retreated to a ruined transport platform next to a staircase. There was no artificial light anywhere. Vega's glow fell into the entrance, casting a sharp rectangle.

Lossoshér whimpered as Chaktor set him down. The old man pressed his hands against his chest. His face was contorted in pain.

"He needs medicine," Chaktor said, worried. "His musculature won't relax on its own."

Guall shoved Chaktor aside and rested a hand on Lossoshér's shoulder. "No, it will. Lossoshér! Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Lossoshér groaned. "I hear you."

"Will you be strong for your Thort?"

The transmitter guardian twitched, his eyes gleaming wetly. "Yes, my lord."

"Perry!" Bull pointed to the entrance. Several of Nerlan's soldiers were approaching. "We've got company. They probably want to join Tschubai and Guall."

Rhodan grimaced. Could they take advantage of the situation? "Ras, I know you're not an actor, but we could really use a bit of support."

“I understand.” The Sudanese man squared his shoulders. He waved the soldiers over.

“We have to go down!” Guall decreed. Chaktor pulled Lossoshér to his feet, and they went down the stairs. The soldiers followed them. Some clapped Guall on the upper arm and made complicated gestures in Tschubai’s direction. They looked respectful and euphoric.

As if one human and one Ferron could save them all, Rhodan thought bitterly.

They reached the lower level. Rhodan had hardly taken two steps when the world around him exploded with a mighty crack. Screams and curses rang out. Several detonations shook the ground. The building quaked. Dust encased them. The surging cacophony drowned out the people’s cries. The Last Judgment was descending upon them.

Rhodan felt Tschubai grab his arm. A huge piece of rubble detached from the ceiling. They jumped—the ground under them tore open—and they jumped again. They landed next to Lossoshér. There was no time to thank the teleporter. Rhodan thought through their options at lighting speed. “If we stay here, we’ll be buried! Is there another way out?”

Guall indicated their right, along the passage. The ceiling was making an ugly creaking sound. In two places, it had already caved in, with the rest of the heavy plates appearing to follow in short order.

Rhodan looked around for Bull. His friend was uninjured and hurried over to him. Together, they ran for their lives.

“Ras, get Lossoshér out of here!” Rhodan called to the teleporter, even if it would exhaust him. He thought about Thora and Sue, but in their situation, he couldn’t spare any worry for them. Getting to safety came first.

I’m getting us out of this hell in one piece, he swore to himself. *I’m not losing any friends in this era. Not a single one.*

Surrounded by Nerlan's soldiers, they put at least fifty meters behind them. Tschubai jumped ahead with Lossoshér and appeared at the second exit. His materialization gave Rhodan the strength not to give up. The teleporter was the goal he was heading for at Bull's side, even if his lungs were making their objections known.

The ceiling gave out. Large pieces plummeted. Death was grasping for them. On the last steps up the staircase, Rhodan screamed the tension out of his body. Next to him, Bull roared. With the last of their strength, they threw themselves outside. The station collapsed in on itself, men and women being entombed with an infernal rumble.

Stones sprayed against their backs. Rhodan stumbled. Bull grabbed his hand and pulled him clear. Behind them, the covering over the exit caved in.

Breathing heavily, Rhodan stopped and rested his hands on his knees. His muscles were burning. They hadn't spent more than seven minutes in the station, but the inner city looked remarkably different now. Intense bombing had left a cratered landscape that reminded him of the moon. In several places, thick smoke wafted over piles of rubble where buildings had so recently stood. The red group of trees where they had held out didn't exist anymore. It looked as though it had melted. At least a dozen buildings had collapsed. *Explosives,* Rhodan realized. *The city dwellers defended themselves against Nerlan's army with explosives.*

The city folk had to be pretty desperate, leaving their own city in rubble and ashes rather than letting the enemy have it. It left him stunned. He straightened himself up and looked out over the square.

"Time to say goodbye," Bull said next to him, toneless. "There's no escaping *this*."

An army of Ferrons and robots was closing in on them, shooting mercilessly at anything that moved. For now, their small group was still outside of the large-scale attack, but in just a few seconds they'd stand right in its center. Nerlan's soldiers were falling, the ranks thinning out. There was no doubt the city-dwellers were

winning this battle. At least in this area, Nerlan's army was as good as beaten. How it looked on other blocks, Rhodan could only assume. The citadel remained unreachable behind its steely walls.

"I wish I were still on Gol," whispered Chaktor, who had reached the station exit before Rhodan and Bull, along with Guall. It had helped that his muscles were used to different gravity. "Anywhere but here."

"Ras!" Lossoshér pleaded. "Get us away from here!"

The Sudanese man lowered his head. He appeared to be scrambling for words, shame lining his features.

Rhodan answered for him. "He can't. His strength is depleted, and he can't get all of us out of here. We'll stay together and fight."

And die together, he added mentally. Time seemed to stand still as the red-clad assailants gained more and more ground. Shots ricocheted. Rhodan raised his weapon. "We won't give up! There's cover over there!" He pointed to a still-smoking crater.

"But…Thort…" Lossoshér stammered, looking despairingly at the three-eyed man. "You said—"

"Let's go!" Rhodan shouted. "No time for any blame!" Together with Chaktor, he grabbed Lossoshér and carried him to the crater. A shot brushed his helmet. He heard the whistling of more projectiles.

They threw themselves behind cover as bullets flew over their heads. It was over. They had no chance against these superior numbers.

"We're going to die," Chaktor said in an unnervingly quiet voice. He looked at Rhodan. "It's been an honor."

Rhodan spotted movement among the red of their foes. He grabbed Chaktor's arm. "No!" He said firmly. "We're not going to die, my friend!"

"By all the black holes in the universe," Bull uttered. "Isn't that…" He fell silent.

“Thora!” Perry cried, his gaze directed through the smoke at the newly arrived soldiers. He could hardly believe it himself. A large troop was coming to help them, led by a soldier with long, white hair flowing out from under her helmet. It could only be Thora. She was unleashing rage and fury among their opponents with unrelenting ferocity. Explosions flared into existence and made her red eyes gleam.

Like a war goddess, Rhodan thought, shuddering and awestruck at the same time.

The city folk were fleeing. The situation had turned on a dime.

Rhodan stood up and lifted his head. His pulse was beating in his throat. He could have screamed with joy and relief. *And I’m not just happy to be alive,* he realized, astonished. *It’s seeing Thora. She got away from Nerlan.* How in the world had she managed that?

Thora noticed him and ran over. Nothing remained now of the “reserved English lady.” “Rhodan!” She gave him a smile and looked around at the group through the last wisps of smoke. “You’re alive!”

“Where’s Sue?” Bull asked, worried, while Chaktor and Lossoshér performed the purest dance of joy behind him. Guall looked more at ease too.

“She’s with Rukaar.” Thora gestured towards a figure in an impressive battledress. In contrast to Thora’s helmet, Rukaar’s was fully closed.

Rhodan spotted a smaller form walking behind Rukaar, which then hurried closer upon noticing them. Rukaar, too, came over.

“Everyone stand up and step forward!” Guall ordered with a strict voice. “This is a historic moment. Stand to attention!”

Rhodan followed the demand, astonished. Although Guall looked just as ragged as the rest of them, the first Thort exuded gravitas. His third eye’s gaze was directed at Rukaar.

He’s impressive indeed. Rhodan squeezed Thora’s hand. Beside

him, Sue fell into Bull's arms.

Rukaar reached them, surrounded by her husbands and soldiers. Countless Ferrons followed her. A solemn silence hung over the square. The weapons were as silent as the people. Slowly, Rukaar removed her helmet and looked at Guall, her gaze firm. The soldiers from the underground shaft did the same. They lowered their heads in respect. One by one, those surrounding them followed suit. The gesture, performed by several hundred soldiers, made Rhodan shiver.

Rukaar raised her weapon high in the air with both hands. All gazes were directed at her. Rhodan hardly dared breathe; he suspected what Rukaar was about to do.

The commander put down the rifle and threw herself to the ground in front of Guall. "Thort, my soldiers and I are at your disposal!"

11.

On the Run

A Farm in Virginia

September 23, 2036

Gucky lay awake. Sleep was unthinkable. He was listening out into the hallway. At last, he heard the heels of Betty's boots crunching on the straw beyond the bars. Betty had entered the barn without making a sound. He held his breath. Had the blonde woman managed to steal the key? He spied through the bars as she walked purposefully towards him.

The cage door opened with a soft squeak as Betty leaned over to his neck and pushed a key into the lock. Shortly after, the oppressive weight of the metal collar was gone.

Gucky drew a deep breath. "Thanks!" he wrote with the straw. With a sigh of relief, he got to his feet. It was a magnificent feeling.

Betty gave him a sheepish smile, as if she didn't dare accept the gratitude. She held out her hand to him like you might to a child you wanted to lead across the street. He took it, and they stepped out into the hallway, passing dried red splotches. In front of them stood a door that Gucky hadn't been able to see from the cage. It was made of wood, with an old-fashioned handle.

Here it is. The door to freedom.

Betty stepped forward and grasped the handle—just as the wood swung out towards her. With a yelp, she backed away. Several people crowded inside, led by Monk. All of them wore black clothing and held weapons that they aimed at the pair.

Gucky activated his telekinesis, intending to send them whirling away like dead leaves...and failed miserably. Nails bored into his brain, leaving him groaning. Monk's brown eyes directed their gaze

at him. They looked deader than ever. Under his attention, Gucky's legs gave way as if the brown-haired man had kicked him in the back of the knees.

Slowly, Monk turned away from him and focused on Betty.

"Betty, Betty, Betty," Monk said chastisingly. "What do you think you're doing, girl? Haven't I given you a good home?"

Like his companions, he was holding a pistol in his hand. He pushed Betty and Gucky back into the hallway. Gucky found it a struggle to move, although the pain subsided somewhat as long as Monk wasn't looking at him.

In total, five people were walking behind Monk. Like their leader, the three men and two women were wearing black leather jackets over black clothing, the V-cut necks revealing the same brand that Monk bore: the suffering man on the cross. They looked more like a band than religious fanatics. At least, the religious nuts that Gucky knew from online media had looked different.

What a load of crap, Gucky thought. His hopes of escape had shattered at the sight of the weapons.

Betty's voice trembled. "I... I just wanted to talk him for a walk. Outside in the field."

Monk contorted his face into a grimace. It made his attractive features look frightening, his cold eyes housing no mercy. "Don't mess with me, girl. There are security cameras. And I can read."

Betty's eyes widened.

Distraught, Gucky's eyes fell on the disgusting straw. Done. Over. They'd lost. Monk knew everything.

"But...cameras are..." Betty fell silent, ashamed.

"The devil's eyes?" Monk finished, unruffled. "Oh yes, that they are." His razor-sharp gaze found Gucky. "And the devil is like an animal, chained up to iron bands. You mustn't get too close to him, girl. But when your belief is truly steadfast, you can meet him and

step very close to him—as far as the chain reaches. The right distance must be maintained. Not many are capable of it." Monk raised his weapon and aimed it at Gucky's head. "But I am. I am God's right hand. And what are you?"

Gucky pressed himself to the ground. Monk's gaze had made him instinctively get down on all fours. In just a few days, playacting as an animal had embedded itself into his flesh and blood. He whimpered pitifully. *I can't fool him,* he recognized in Monk's face. As alien as humans' body language was, Monk's features revealed a fury that he understood without a shadow of a doubt. *Monk knows. He knows everything.*

"What are you?" Monk shouted at him. "How come you can read? Out with it! Or do you want to die?"

Gucky looked at the weapon's barrel and remembered how quickly Monk had pulled it once before. The fanatic wouldn't hesitate for long. Desperately, Gucky looked at Betty and considered whether he should risk a jump. He felt a fist in his mind that seemed to be grabbing hold of several areas and squeezing them together. A jump was impossible. Imploringly, he looked at Betty's horrified face. Did the human woman have an idea that could help them?

Monk caught Gucky's gaze and swung the weapon around. He aimed it at Betty's forehead. "All right, then. If you won't listen, *doggy,* then I'll just kill your little friend."

Monk's finger moved. Gucky realized that Monk wasn't threatening him. The demented small-ears wasn't wasting any time. He was firing!

With strength born of desperation, Gucky managed to telekinetically push the weapon aside. Only by a fraction, but the consequences were far-reaching. Someone emitted a blood-curdling scream. The black-clad woman next to Monk had been hit. She was holding her chest and bellowing in pain.

Monk was distracted. He whipped around, his chin folding downward. The fist in Gucky's brain let go, and he felt his strength

coming back. He hastily grabbed Betty's hand and jumped. It was mortal fear that awakened unsuspected power in him and made the jump possible. And also the opportune moment, since Monk's mental grip was gone.

The hallway with the screaming human woman vanished. Around them appeared the night-dark buildings of a farm. They were standing beneath the stars. Above them, clouds covered parts of the sky. They hadn't gotten far. Gucky could still hear the woman who had been shot. Devastating pain pulsed in his head, but he paid it no attention. *I was a fighter once,* he reminded himself. Uncomfortable thoughts rose in him that he quickly suppressed. There was no time for that. They had to get away.

Betty's whole body was shaking. Every scream from the barn made her wince. "Does Serlice have to die?"

"By all the carrots on Earth, Betty, *we're* going to die if you don't pull yourself together!" Gucky uttered frantically. He didn't think he could teleport again. "Concentrate! Where's that hole in the fence? Get us out of here!"

Betty squeezed his hand and nodded. Determined, they started running. It was a struggle for Gucky to follow her with his short legs. Sticks and stones dug into the soles of his feet. They rushed on alongside a watering trough next to a rusted tractor.

She brought him to a metal fence about two meters tall. The earth in one spot moved by itself, flying high into the air. Behind them, voices grew loud. Monk barked orders.

"I want those devilspawn dead!" he screeched. "They cannot be used for God's righteous works! Shoot them down!"

"Faster!" Gucky urged. *Oh, please, Betty, faster!* He'd gladly have helped her, but the pain in his mind made telekinesis impossible. The jump had consumed his strength.

"Here we go!" The hole was open. Betty let him go first. He rolled through the hole, with the girl following close behind. They arrived in a meadow not far from an unharvested cornfield where

the grass reached to Gucky's knees.

"Into the cornfield!" Gucky cried to Betty. "If you bend down, they won't be able to see us!"

They sprinted off. Floodlights switched on, casting long shadows from their bodies onto the grass. Shots rang out.

They mean business, Gucky thought in horror. He'd hoped the small-ears would at least try to capture them alive, but Monk's words had been unambiguous. He wanted to see the two of them dead.

Cold wind dried the sweat beads in Gucky's coat. He was so afraid that his nose felt like burning coals. He had to force himself to keep running. Bullets whistled past their ears. Twice, Betty screamed as if she'd been hit, but it was just the shock of the bullet right next to her.

Behind them, motors started running. Dogs barked threateningly.

"They're following us!" Betty cried, breathless. Tears of fear and distress had welled in her eyes.

It took all of Gucky's physical strength to drag her onward. He suspected they had little chance of success. In a few minutes, their pursuers would catch up. But giving up was unthinkable.

They hurried through the cornfield, then broke through it onto a dried dirt road. Gucky's gaze was fixated on the uneven ground. One plunge through a pothole could spell the end. "Keep going!" he called to Betty.

Vehicles were approaching from two sides. Behind them, dogs barked and voices blared. Monk's was among them.

"Stay still and I *might* spare your lives!"

Gucky turned in a circle, holding Betty by the hand as she sobbed. Which way? If only he could teleport. He decided to dive into another field and had almost reached the plants when a loud snarl had him spinning around to look. A monster with black fur

rushed out of the darkness towards Gucky, its teeth bared. It was almost as tall as he was. Innumerable white teeth gleamed in its reddish brown muzzle.

Betty screamed; Gucky let go of her and threw both arms up defensively. The animal leaped straight for his throat. But but before it reached him, the creature fell to the ground, whimpering. A power invisible to Gucky had brought it down.

What... Gucky didn't understand. Had their pursuers slain the animal? Did they want to take the pair alive after all?

Monk stepped out of the cornfield, the weapon in his hand. His black leather jacket fluttered behind him, his hair hanging tangled in his face. "You miscreants will pay for that! How dare you harm a warrior of God?"

"Lower your weapons!" ordered an irate yet familiar voice above Gucky. A speaker was amplifying the words.

Stunned, Monk really did lower his hand. The three men behind him lowered their pistols too. They stepped slowly out of the field and stared upward as if seeing a vision.

Julian Tifflor! Gucky spun around, craned his head up, and looked at Julian, who was—accompanied by at least twenty men and women in Arkonide battledresses—descending towards them from above. He and his people were coming right out of the sky. In the approaching cavalry's hands were Arkonide beam weapons, which had undoubtedly taken out the monster dog at the last second.

"Demons!" panted a black-clad man behind Monk. He swung his pistol up and opened fire. Bullets collided with Arkonide shields and dissolved into nothing.

Gucky bounded over to Betty in a single step and dragged her with him, taking her a good distance away from Monk and the danger. A short, intense exchange of gunfire erupted. Two of the three black-clad small-ears fell onto the dirty road and stopped moving. Presumably, Julian and his people had stunned them.

“Cease fire!” Monk barked at his side. By now, more fanatics had reached the road. The two cars came up beside them and stopped. More figures in black got out and stared upward. Ever more people in Arkonide suits assembled in the sky. Their defensive shields shimmered in the starlight. By now, at least forty of them were flying above the field, covering a vast area. The image made quite an impression on Gucky.

Monk’s voice sounded hoarse in the face of these superior forces. “We surrender.”

“Disarm them!” called Mildred Orsons, who landed next to Gucky with a deactivated shield. “And secure the farm! There have to be more of them!”

“Mildred!” Gucky stretched his arms out towards the black-haired woman. He pressed himself against the battledress. The relief was overpowering. He and Betty were going to live. No more captivity. “How did you find us?”

Julian flew over to them and grinned through the helmet visor. “Good oId-fashioned detective work. For a suitable fee, Maro was willing to bring us to the black-market trader. He told us about Moncadas. But Greg Heston only had a rough idea of where Moncadas came from. Somewhere in Virginia. So we informed Mercant and Adams and asked for their support. They gave us backup. Caroline Frank, who has a gift that lets her find people, was set on you, but she could only narrow it down to an area of about four hundred square meters. Something was blocking her ability. The rest was down to thorough acoustic monitoring and physical searching.”

The young man contorted his face before continuing. “A little Orwellian, I’ll admit, but we wanted to find you at all costs. These religious nuts and their farm stood out in particular, of course, but they unfortunately withstood an initial inspection. The gunfire finally led us here. Don’t ask what we’ve been through before this. In this stretch of land, every second person starts spraying bullets or talking suspiciously.”

Gucky knew that Julian was exaggerating, but that didn’t bother

him. The relief of being rescued overrode anything else. He could have jumped for joy if his body weren't so drained. Exhausted, he looked over at Betty, who was anxiously huddling against the corn plants and keeping to the background. She looked overwhelmed by the situation and the many strange people. Her gaze was lowered, her back rounder than ever before.

"Everything's going to be fine, Betty," Gucky said quietly. He went over to the young human woman and took her hand in his. "You helped me survive captivity and escape—and now I'll help you. You'll get a new life in Terrania, and I'm here for you."

Betty raised her head and gave him a shy smile. It made her look beautiful.

Gucky saw Julian's and Mildred's surprised faces. The surrounding men and women under Tiff's command also had curious expressions that Gucky couldn't clearly interpret. Maybe it wasn't usual among humans to talk so openly with one another? Gucky didn't care. He never forgot about anyone who did him good.

Resolute, he raised his head and looked up at Julian. On a fundamental level, he only wanted to sleep. To collapse right there on the spot. The grass smelled wonderful, and the wind spoke of freedom. Ten hours of rest under the open sky, and after that, a spacecraft's worth of carrots—that was what he wished for from the bottom of his heart. But there was something more important to do.

He again reached out with his thought-feelers. The headache flared up under the strain; he grew dizzy. There was a buzzing in Gucky's ears. A hammer beat relentlessly against the top of his skull.

"Julian," he mustered with some effort, "I think your father is here. Under the building...there are..."

Gucky broke off mid-sentence. His brain spasmed and he whimpered in anguish. The mental strain was too great. Blackness engulfed him.

12.

Parting

Rofus

The New Age

Rhodan was walking in the middle, between Thora and Sue. He didn't want to let either of them out of his sight again. Sue had given him an all-too-brief outline of what had happened with Nerlan. Despite all the dread, the prudent girl had thought to convince Rukaar to have the Arkonide battledresses brought out of Nerlan's lab, beamers included. This suit had already served him well before, and now Rhodan was wearing it again, all thanks to Sue.

Unfortunately, Nerlan's people had taken the beamers apart to investigate their makeup, and they couldn't be put back together again. The suits, too, had traces of a botched inspection. The oxygen tanks were empty, the nutrient solutions gone. The camouflage mode was in poor condition, the color changes unable to keep up with the environment changes.

Together with Rukaar and her soldiers, the small group took one of the tunnels the city dwellers had used for their sortie. Rhodan, Tschubai, Thora, and Bull had to bend down for long stretches to avoid hitting the ceiling. Several soldiers with flamethrowers went ahead, lighting up the sewer corridors. The fire was more than a light source. It would also hit approaching enemies.

Guall led their group. So far, he hadn't given any warnings. They didn't seem to be walking into a trap. Behind him walked Tschubai, Rhodan, and the women.

When they exited the tunnel, Rhodan stepped away from Thora and Sue and took over the lead along with Tschubai. He oriented himself to the largest of the towers, which he was sure he recognized from the future based on the mosaics.

How different it looks. Despite the continuous bombardment of the last few days, the building shone with incomparable splendor. As if by a miracle, it was hardly damaged. Rhodan couldn't think of any human construction he had ever found so impressive. Thousands of tales seemed to be depicted on the tiles. He asked Guall about them.

"It's the history of our people before the Dark Age," Guall readily answered. "I went to school only a few streets away from here. One education unit per cycle involved studying the mosaics in person, if there was no bombing alarm." He took a brief pause. "As Nerlan's soldier, I basically attacked and humiliated the Gorchoos more because I'm one of them. I had to be above any suspicion so that no one discovered I'm a city rat. Believe me, Rhodan, I never wanted to attack my hometown, but I lost my family at a young age. In the city, there was too little food, and no one took me in. Nerlan's army my only chance for survival."

They fell silent. Rhodan focused on the route. Despite the differences, he knew roughly where the transmitter was and led the group there with purpose. Rukaar and her soldiers kept guard, with some heavy exchanges of gunfire. The Arkonide suits absorbed the majority of the shots. Using flight mode, Bull and Rhodan brought themselves to a better position. They managed to fend off three attacks before the suits gave out.

Bull cursed. "What the hell did Nerlan do to these things? Mine's not working at all anymore! The shield's dead, Perry."

Rhodan wasn't faring much better. He feverishly searched the environment to find the transmitter's location. On the floor, a collection of blue stones stood out to him, conspicuous among the red and green. The arrangement seemed familiar to him. The stones looked slightly different, but he was sure that the pattern was the same despite later restoration.

"It's about thirty meters from here to the transmitter as the crow flies. We have to go into this building." He pointed to an elongated structure that looked completely different from the military fortress from the future. Regardless, he trusted his bearings.

Luckily, there were no more firefights before they reached the citadel building that he was sure held the arch-shaped doorway to other worlds, and with it, hopefully the way home.

While Tschubai jumped in with Guall to open an electronically secured side door for them, Rhodan thoughts wandered to the future, to the year 2036. There, practically no trace of the city of Remanor had remained. Only the fort, rebuilt several times and destroyed again, was left. And desert. How unimaginable that he now stood right in the middle of events that had occurred ten thousand years before.

The metal door between the mosaics flew open. They stepped into a spacious building. The massive facility almost staggered Rhodan. Despite the war, extravagant wealth was the order of the day here. Even on the inside, resplendent mosaics hung, true masterpieces made of small tiles in every color of the rainbow. To a human observer, the assortment looked confusing and cluttered. Nonetheless, the artistry was obvious. Every individual stone had been inserted lovingly and meticulously to form the whole.

Rhodan looked around, squinting. “We’re in the right place, I’m sure of that. But the ceiling height is wrong.” The room had been about three and a half meters tall and had been built by Ferrons around the gate itself. Rhodan could be certain of that because the room had let sand and dust in. A people that could produce something as superior as the transmitters could no doubt construct better buildings.

“We have to go down from this level,” Bull assumed, speaking on the com channel. “The ground might have sunk over all those years.”

They looked for a staircase leading down and found one. The walls looked different. The ceiling, too, was significantly higher in the lower area. They didn’t encounter anyone along the way. If there were any foes present, they had drawn back in the face of superior forces. For a while, they wandered around the passages in confusion. Rhodan was unsure of what exactly to look for. The underground facilities looked similar but by no means identical to those in the future. There were different rooms and divisions.

Guall grew restless. He walked past Rhodan and pointed to a wall. “Ras, could you jump behind there? There’s a space behind this wall.”

Tschubai hesitated. Rhodan saw the sweat on his forehead. What would happen if Tschubai jumped inside the stone? Would it even work or would he be flung back?

“I’ll come with you,” Lossoshér said valiantly. “Some transmitters have a hidden entrance. I know how to recognize it and open it.”

The teleporter gave Rhodan a curt nod, then took Lossoshér by the arm and jumped.

Torturous minutes of waiting passed. Then, three meters away, an oval piece of wall opened up as if by magic.

“Follow me,” said Rhodan. He led the group into a room measuring eight by eight meters. In the middle towered an arch-shaped construction with the top portion missing.

Rhodan touched his helmet, which folded up with a hissing sound. His heart beat faster. “The transmitter,” he said quietly. Just as he’d hoped, the device was standing right here, in the same spot.

Bull grinned at him. “We did it.”

Lossohér got to work straight away, while Rukaar and her people gazed at the artifact in wonder. Blue light shone between the columns and illuminated their faces. Two thick beams of energy formed the distinctive arch.

“The transmitter is ready,” Lossohér reported after a few minutes. “We can leave Rofus. Sadly, I can’t say where we will come out.” He cast a meaningful glance at the group. This revealed to Rhodan and his friends that Lossoshér also had no idea *when* they would come out, but he wouldn’t share this in front of Guall and the others. “When we arrive, I can look over the settings in peace.”

Rhodan nodded at him encouragingly. He was confident they would find a way back to their own time. “Unfortunately, the suits

are just dead weight now." He looked at Sue, whose face was as red as a lobster. With the anti-grav units in the suits no longer working properly and the energy reserves empty, the Arkonide devices weighed up to fifty kilos depending on the impairment. "Let's take them off."

Relieved, Bull threw his helmet to the ground. The others followed his lead. Before long, they'd discarded the suits.

Slowly, Rhodan turned to Guall, who was looking at the transmitter with his characteristic calm. "Will you come with us, Guall?"

Guall closed his lower eyes while the chalcedony-colored one looked fixedly at Rhodan. His hand rested on Lossoshér's holo-cube, which hung on a chain around his neck. "No, Rhodan. I'm the Thort, chosen to end the Dark Age. I belong to Remanor. It's about lighting a beacon."

"I thought so." Rhodan extended his hand. "And I thank you. You're facing up to the responsibility and your purpose. Anyone who takes their destiny wholly and completely into their own hands has my respect."

He wished he could have convinced Guall to come with them, but he saw a kindred spirit in the three-eyed Ferron. In Guall's place, Rhodan wouldn't have acted any differently. Just as Rhodan himself had when the *Stardust* had landed in the Gobi, met with hostility from the entire world, Guall had to do what he thought was right.

Thora grimaced. "Rhodan, that's suicide! Rukaar hasn't unified Nerlan's camp under her command! She has maybe three hundred soldiers following her! What good will that do?"

"It's a beginning," Rukaar said proudly. "We'll change the course of events." She stepped over to Rhodan, ignoring Thora's skeptical gaze. Her embrace contained a thousand words she hadn't said to him.

Rhodan regretted not being able to speak more with her and

learn more about her. They no doubt could have learned a lot from each other.

The commander took a step back, took off her helmet, and took his face in both hands. She lowered her forehead in a Ferron gesture of friendship and respect. Rhodan did the same and bent down to her height. Their heads touched each other tentatively.

“Farewell, Rhodan,” Rukaar said, then stepped back. “All of you, farewell. We have to go. There’s a battle to be decided and a new era to ring in.”

Guall nodded to her. With Rukaar’s soldiers, the two left the transmitter room.

Rhodan turned around and stepped over to the others in the archway. While Lossoshér activated the necessary circuits and initialized the emission via the radiation field, Rhodan wondered if Guall, the first Thort of the Ferrons, could really glimpse the future with his third eye—and what, indeed, he saw there.